

MANHUNT

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DETECTIVE STORY MONTHLY

EVERYBODY'S WATCHING ME

A New Mystery Thriller By

Mickey Spillane

JANUARY



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MANHUNT

JANUARY, 1953

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Everybody's Watching Me

BY MICKEY SPILLANE



ILLUSTRATION BY MATT BAKER

I HANDED the guy the note and shivered a little bit because the guy was as big as they come, and even though he had a belly you couldn't get your arms around, you wouldn't want to be the one who figured you could sink your fist in it. The belly was as hard as the rest of him, but not quite as hard as his face.

Then I knew how hard the back of his hand was because he smashed it across my jaw and I could taste the blood where my teeth bit into my cheek.

Maybe the guy holding my arm knew I couldn't talk because he said, "A guy give him a fin to bring it, boss. He said that."

"Who, kid?"

The killers were afraid of Vetter, and their fear made them anxious to hunt him down and kill him. But how do you hunt a man nobody's ever seen?

I spit the blood out easy so it dribbled down my chin instead of going on the floor. "Gee, Mr. Renzo . . ."

His hand made a dull, soggy crack on my skin. The buzz got louder in my ears and there was a jagged, pounding pain in my skull.

"Maybe you didn't hear me the first time, kid. I said who."

The hand let go my arm and I slumped to the floor. I didn't want to, but I had to. There were no legs

under me any more. My eyes were open, conscious of only the movement of ponderous things that got closer. Things that moved quickly and seemed to dent my side without causing any feeling at all.

That other voice said, "He's out, boss. He ain't saying a thing."

"I'll make him talk."

"Won't help none. So a guy gives him a fin to bring the note. He's not going into a song and dance with it. To the kid a fin's a lot of dough. He watches the fin and not the guy."

"You're getting too damn bright," Renzo said.

"That's what you pay me for being, boss."

"Then act bright. You think a guy hands a note like this to some kid? Any kid at all? You think a kid's gonna bull in here to deliver it when he can chuck it down a drain and take off with the fin?"

"So the kid's got morals."

"So the kid knows the guy or the guy knows him. He ain't letting no kid get away with his fin." The feet moved away from me, propped themselves against the dark blur of the desk. "You read this thing?" Renzo asked.

"No."

"Listen then. 'Cooley is dead. Now my fine fat louse, I'm going to spill your guts all over your own floor.' " Renzo's voice droned to a stop. He sucked hard on the cigar and said, "It's signed, *Vetter*."

You could hear the unspoken

words in the silence. That hush that comes when the name was mentioned and the other's half-whispered "Son of a bitch they were buddies, boss?"

"Who cares? If that crumb shows his face around here, I'll break his lousy back. Vetter, Vetter, Vetter. Everyplace you go that crumb's name you hear."

"Boss, look. You don't want to tangle with that guy. He's killed plenty of guys. He's . . ."

"He's different from me? You think he's a hard guy?"

"You ask around, boss. They'll tell you. That guy don't give a damn for nobody. He'll kill you for looking at him."

"Maybe in his own back yard he will. Not here, Johnny, not here. This is my city and my back yard. Here things go my way and Vetter'll get what Cooley got." He sucked on the cigar again and I began to smell the smoke. "Guys what pull a fastie on me get killed. Now Cooley don't work my tables for no more smart plays. Pretty soon the cops can take Vetter off their list because he won't be around no more either."

"You going to take him, boss?" Johnny said.

"What do you think?"

"Anything you say, boss. I'll pass the word around. Somebody'll know what he looks like and I'll finger him." He paused, then, "What about the kid?"

"He's our finger, Johnny."

"Him?"

"You ain't so bright as I thought.

You should get your ears to the ground more. You should hear things about Vetter. He pays off for favors. The errand was worth a fin, but he's gonna look in to make sure the letter got here. Then he spots the kid for his busted up face. First time he makes contact we got him. You know what, Johnnie? To Vetter I'm going to do things slow. When they find him the cops get all excited but they don't do nothing. They're glad to see Vetter dead. But other places the word gets around, see? Anybody can bump Vetter gets to be pretty big and nobody pulls any more smart ones. You understand, Johnny?"

"Sure, boss. I get it. You're going to do it yourself?"

"Just me, kid, just me. Like Helen says I got a passion to do something myself and I just got to do it. Vetter's for me. He better be plenty big, plenty fast and ready to start shooting the second we meet up."

It was like when Pop used to say he'd do something and we knew he'd do it sure. You look at him with your face showing the awe a kid gets when he knows fear and respect at the same time and that's how Johnny must have been looking at Renzo. I knew it because it was in his voice too when he said, "You'll do it, boss. You'll own this town lock, stock and gun butt yet."

"I own it now, Johnny. Never forget it. Now wake that kid up."

This time I had feeling and it hurt. The hand that slapped the full

vision back to my eyes started the blood running in my mouth again and I could feel my lungs choking on a sob.

"What was he like, kid?" The hand came down again and this time Renzo took a step forward. His fingers grabbed my coat and jerked me off the floor.

"You got asked a question. What was he like?"

"He was . . . big," I said. The damn slob choked me again and I wanted to break something over his head.

"How big?"

"Like you. Bigger'n six. Heavy."

Renzo's mouth twisted into a sneer and he grinned at me. "More. What was his face like?"

"I don't know. It was dark. I couldn't see him good."

He threw me. Right across the room he threw me and my back smashed the wall and twisted and I could feel the tears rolling down my face from the pain.

"You don't lie to Renzo, kid. If you was older and bigger I'd break you up into little pieces until you talked. It ain't worth a fin. Now you start telling me what I want to hear and maybe I'll slip you something."

"I . . . I don't know. Honest, I . . . if I saw him again it'd be different." The pain caught me again and I had to gag back my voice.

"You'd know him again?"

"Yes."

Johnny said, "What's your name,

kid?"

"Joe . . . Boyle."

"Where do you live?" It was Renzo this time.

"Gidney Street," I told him.
"Number three."

"You work?"

"Gordon's. I . . . push."

"What'd he say?" Renzo's voice had a nasty tone to it.

"Gordon's a junkie," Johnny said for me. "Has a place on River Street. The kid pushes a cart for him collecting metal scraps."

"Check on it," Renzo said, "then stick with him. You know what to do."

"He won't get away, boss. He'll be around whenever we want him. You think Vetter will do what you say?"

"Don't things always happen like I say? Now get him out of here. Go over him again so he'll know we mean what we say. That was a lousy fin he worked for."

After things hurt so much they begin to stop hurting completely. I could feel the way I went through the air, knew my foot hit the railing and could taste the cinders that ground in my mouth. I lay there like I was pressed out, waiting for the pain to come swelling back, making sounds I didn't want to make. My stomach wanted to break loose but couldn't find the strength and I just lay there cursing guys like Renzo who could do anything they wanted and get away with it.

Then the darkness came, went away briefly and came back again. When it lost itself in the dawn of agony there were hands brushing the dirt from my face and the smell of flowers from the softness that was a woman who held me and said, "You poor kid, you poor kid."

My eyes opened and looked at her. It was like something you dream about because she was the kind of woman you always stare at, knowing you can't have. She was beautiful, with yellow hair that tumbled down her neck like a torch that lit up her whole body. Her name was Helen Troy and I wanted to say, "Hello, Helen," but couldn't get the words out of my mouth.

Know her? Sure, everybody knew her. She was Renzo's feature attraction at his Hideaway Club and her picture was all over town. But I never thought I'd get to have my head in her lap.

There were feet coming up the path that turned into one of the men from the stop at the gate and Helen said, "Give me a hand, Finney. Something happened to the kid."

The guy she called Finney stood there with his hands on his hips shaking his head. "Something'll happen to you if you don't leave him be. The boss gives orders."

She tightened up all over, her fingers biting into my shoulder. It hurt but I didn't care a bit. "Renzo? The pig!" She spat it out with a hiss. She turned her head slowly and

looked at me. "Did he do this, kid?"

I nodded. It was all I could do.

"Finney," she said, "go get my car. I'm taking the kid to a doctor."

"Helen, I'm telling you . . ."

"Suppose I told the cops . . . no, not the cops, the feds in this town that you have holes in your arms?"

I thought Finney was going to smack her. He reached down with his hand back but he stopped. When a dame looks at you that way you don't do anything except what she tells you to.

"I'll get the car," he said.

She got me on my feet and I had to lean on her to stay there. She was just as big as I was. Stronger at the moment. Faces as bad off as mine weren't new to her, so she smiled and I tried to smile back and we started off down the path.

We said it was a fight and the doctor did what he had to do. He laid on the tape and told me to rest a week then come back. I saw my face in his mirror, shuddered and turned away. No matter what I did I hurt all over and when I thought of Renzo all I could think of was that I hoped somebody would kill him. I hoped they'd kill him while I watched and I hoped it would take a long, long time for him to die.

Helen got me out to the car, closed the door after me and slid in behind the wheel. I told her where I lived and she drove up to the house. The garbage cans had been spilled all over the sidewalk and it stank.

She looked at me curiously. "Here?"

"That's right," I told her. "Thanks for everything."

Then she saw the sign on the door. It read, ROOMS. "Your family live here too?"

"I don't have a family. It's a rooming house."

For a second I saw her teeth, white and even, as she pulled her mouth tight. "I can't leave you here. Somebody has to look after you."

"Lady, if . . ."

"Ease off, kid. What did you say your name was?"

"Joe."

"Okay, Joe. Let me do things my way. I'm not much good for anything but every once in awhile I come in handy for something decent."

"Gee, lady . . ."

"Helen."

"Well, you're the nicest person I've ever known."

I said she was beautiful. She had the beauty of the flashiest tramp you could find. That kind of beauty. She was like the dames in the big shows who are always tall and sleepy looking and who you'd always look at but wouldn't marry or take home to your folks. That's the kind of beauty she had. But for a long couple of seconds she seemed to grow a new kind of beauty that was entirely different and she smiled at me.

"Joe . . ." and her voice was warm and husky, "that's the nicest thing said in the nicest way I've

heard in a very long time."

My mouth still hurt too much to smile back so I did it with my eyes. Then something happened to her face. It got all strange and curious, a little bit puzzled and she leaned forward and I could smell the flowers again as that impossible something happened when she barely touched her mouth to mine before drawing back with that searching movement of her eyes.

"You're a funny kid, Joe."

She shoved the car into gear and let it roll away from the curb. I tried to sit upright, my hand on the door latch. "Look, I got to get out."

"I can't leave you here."

"Then where . . ."

"You're going back to my place. Damn it, Renzo did this to you and I feel partly responsible."

"That's all right. You only work for him."

"It doesn't matter. You can't stay there."

"You're going to get in trouble, Helen."

She turned and flashed me a smile. "I'm always in trouble."

"Not with him."

"I can handle that guy."

She must have felt the shudder that went through me.

"You'd be surprised how I can handle that fat slob," she said. Then added in an undertone I wasn't supposed to hear, "Sometimes."

It was a place that belonged to her like flowers belong in a rock garden. It was the top floor of an apartment

hotel where the wheels all stayed in the best part of town with a private lawn twelve stories up where you could look out over the city and watch the lights wink back at you.

She made me take all my clothes off and while I soaked in a warm bath full of suds she scrounged up a decent suit that was a size too big, but still the cleanest thing I had worn in a long while. I put it on and came out in the living room feeling good and sat down in the big chair while she brought in tea.

Helen of Troy, I thought. So this is what she looked like. Somebody it would take a million bucks and a million years to get close to . . . and here I was with nothing in no time at all.

"Feel better, Joe?"

"A little."

"Want to talk? You don't have to if you don't want to."

"There's not much to say. He worked me over."

"How old are you, Joe?"

I didn't want to go too high. "Twenty-one," I said.

There it was again, that same curious expression. I was glad of the bandages across my face so she couldn't be sure if I was lying or not.

I said, "How old are you?" and grinned at her.

"Almost thirty, Joe. That's pretty old, isn't it?"

"Not so old."

She sipped at the tea in her hand. "How did you happen to cross Renzo?"

It hurt to think about it. "Tonight," I said, "it had just gotten dark. A guy asked me if I'd run a message to somebody for five bucks and I said I would. It was for Mr. Renzo and he told me to take it to the Hideaway Club.

"At first the guy at the gate wouldn't let me in, then he called down that other one, Johnny. He took me in, all right."

"Yes?"

"Renzo started giving it to me."

"Remember what the message said?"

Remember? I'd never forget it. I'd hope from now until I died that the guy who wrote it did everything he said he'd do.

"Somebody called Vetter said he'd kill Renzo," I told her.

Her smile was distant, hard. "He'll have to be a pretty tough guy," she said. What she said next was almost under her breath and she was staring into the night when she said it. "A guy like that I could go for."

"What?"

"Nothing, Joe." The hardness left her smile until she was a soft thing. "What else happened?"

Inside my chest my heart beat so fast it felt like it was going to smash my ribs loose. "I . . . heard them say . . . I would have to finger the man for them."

"You?"

I nodded, my hand feeling the soreness across my jaw.

She stood up slowly, the way a cat would. She was all mad and tense

but you couldn't tell unless you saw her eyes. They were the same eyes that made the Finney guy jump. "Vetter," she said. "I've heard the name before."

"The note said something about a guy named Cooley who's dead."

I was watching her back and I saw the shock of the name make the muscles across her shoulders dance in the light. The tightness went down her body until she stood there stiff-legged, the flowing curves of her chest the only things that moved at all.

"Vetter," she said. "He was Cooley's friend."

"You knew Cooley?"

Her shoulders relaxed and she picked a cigarette out of a box and lit it. She turned around, smiling, the beauty I had seen in the car there again.

"Yes," Helen said softly, "I knew Cooley."

"Gee."

She wasn't talking to me any more. She was speaking to somebody who wasn't there and each word stabbed her deeper until her eyes were wet. "I knew Cooley very well. He was . . . nice. He was a big man, broad in the shoulders with hands that could squeeze a woman . . ." She paused and took a slow pull on the cigarette. "His voice could make you laugh or cry. Sometimes both. He was an engineer with a quick mind. He figured how he could make money from Renzo's tables and did it. He even laughed

at Renzo and told him crooked wheels could be taken by anybody who knew how."

The tears started in the corners of her eyes but didn't fall. They stayed there, held back by pride maybe.

"We met one night. I had never met anyone like him before. It was wonderful, but we were never meant for each other. It was one of those things. Cooley was engaged to a girl in town, a very prominent girl."

The smoke of the cigarette in her hand swirled up and blurred her face.

"But I loved him," she said. With a sudden flick of her fingers she snapped the butt on the rug and ground it out with her shoe. "I hope he kills him! I hope he kills him!"

Her eyes drew a line up the floor until they were on mine. They were clear again, steady, curious for another moment, then steady again. I said, "You don't . . . like Renzo very much?"

"How well do you know people, Joe?"

I didn't say anything.

"You know them too, don't you? You don't live in the nice section of town. You know the dirt and how people are underneath. In a way you're lucky. You know it now, not when you're too old. Look at me, Joe. You've seen women like me before? I'm not much good. I look like a million but I'm not worth a cent. A lot of names fit me and they belong. I didn't get that way because I wanted to. He did it. Renzo.

I was doing fine until I met him.

"Sure, some young kids might think I'm on top, but they never get to peek behind the curtain. They never see what I'm forced into and the kind of people I have to know because others don't want to know me. If they do they don't want anybody to know about it."

"Don't say those things, Helen."

"Kid, in ten years I've met two decent people. Cooley was the first." She grinned and the hate left her face. "You're the other one. You don't give a hang what I'm like, do you?"

"I never met anybody like you before."

"Tell me more." Her grin got bigger.

"Well, you're beautiful. I mean real beautiful. And nice. You sure are built . . ."

"Good enough," she said and let the laugh come out. It was a deep, happy laugh and sounded just right for her. "Finish your tea."

I had almost forgotten about it. I drained it down, the heat of it biting into the cuts along my cheek. "Helen . . . I ought to go home. If Mr. Renzo finds out about this, he's going to burn up."

"He won't touch me, Joe."

I let out a grunt.

"You either. There's a bed in there. Crawl into it. You've had enough talk for the night."

I woke up before she did. My back hurt too much to sleep and the

blood pounded in my head too hard to keep it on the pillow. The clock beside the bed said it was seven-twenty and I kicked off the covers and dragged my clothes on.

The telephone was in the living room and I took it off the cradle quietly. When I dialed the number I waited, said hello as softly as I could and asked for Nick.

He came on in a minute with a coarse, "Yeah?"

"This is Joe, Nick."

"Hey, where are you, boy? I been scrounging all over the dump for you. Gordon'll kick your tail if you don't get down here. Two other guys didn't show . . ."

"Shut up and listen. I'm in a spot."

"You ain't kidding. Gordon said. . . ."

"Not that, jerk. You see anybody around the house this morning?"

I could almost hear him think. Finally he said, "Car parked across the street. Think there was a guy in it." Then, "Yeah, yeah, wait up. Somebody was giving the old lady some lip this morning. Guess I was still half asleep. Heard your name mentioned."

"Brother!"

"What's up, pal?"

"I can't tell you now. You tell Gordon I'm sick or something, okay?"

"Nuts. I'll tell him you're in the clink. He's tired of that sick business. You ain't been there long enough to get sick yet."

"Tell him what you please. Just tell him. I'll call you tonight." I slipped the phone back and turned around. I hadn't been as quiet as I thought I'd been. Helen was standing there in the doorway of her bedroom, a lovely golden girl, a bright morning flower wrapped in a black stem like a bud ready to pop.

"What is it, Joe?"

There wasn't any use hiding things from her. "Somebody's watching the house. They were looking for me this morning."

"Scared, Joe?"

"Darn right I'm scared! I don't want to get laid out in some swamp with my neck broken. That guy Renzo is nuts. He'll do anything when he gets mad."

"I know," Helen said quietly. Her hand made an unconscious movement across her mouth. "Come on, let's get some breakfast."

We found out who Vetter was that morning. At least Helen found out. She didn't cut corners or make sly inquiries. She did an impossible thing and drove me into town, parked the car and took a cab to a big brownstone building that didn't look a bit different from any other building like it in the country. Across the door it said, PRECINCT NO. 4 and the cop at the desk said the captain would be more than pleased to see us.

The captain was more than pleased, all right. It started his day off right when she came in and he almost

offered me a cigar. The nameplate said his name was Gerot and if I had to pick a cop out to talk to, I'd pick him. He was in his late thirties with a build like a wrestler and I'd hate to be in the guy's shoes who tried to bribe him.

It took him a minute to settle down. A gorgeous blonde in a dark green gabardine suit blossoming with curves didn't walk in every day. And when he did settle down, it was to look at me and say, "What can I do for you?" but looking like he already knew what happened.

Helen surprised him. "I'd like to know something about a man," she said. "His name is Vetter."

The scowl started in the middle of his forehead and spread to his hairline.

"Why?"

She surprised him again. "Because he promised to kill Mark Renzo."

You could watch his face change, see it grow intense, sharpen, notice the beginning of a caustic smile twitch at his lips. "Lady, do you know what you're talking about?"

"I think so."

"You think?"

"Look at me," she said. Captain Gerot's eyes met hers, narrowed and stayed that way. "What do you see, Captain?"

"Somebody who's been around. You know the answers, don't you?"

"All of them, Captain. The questions, too."

I was forgotten. I was something that didn't matter and I was happy

about it.

Helen said, "What do you think about Renzo, Captain?"

"He stinks. He operates outside city limits where the police have no jurisdiction and he has the county police sewed up. I think he has some of my men sewed up too. I can't be sure but I wish I were. He's got a record in two states, he's clean here. I'd like to pin a few jobs on that guy. There's no evidence, yet he pulled them. I know this . . . if I start investigating I'm going to have some wheels on my neck."

Helen nodded. "I could add more. It really doesn't matter. You know what happened to Jack Cooley?"

Gerot's face looked mean. "I know I've had the papers and the state attorney climb me for it."

"I don't mean that."

The captain dropped his face in his hands resignedly, wiped his eyes and looked up again. "His car was found with bullet holes in it. The quantity of blood in the car indicated that nobody could have spilled that much and kept on living. We never found the body."

"You know why he died?"

"Who knows? I can guess from what I heard. He crossed Renzo, some said. I even picked up some info that said he was in the narcotics racket. He had plenty of cash and no place to show where it came from."

"Even so, Captain, if it was murder, and Renzo's behind it, you'd like it to be paid for."

The light blue of Gerot's eyes softened dangerously. "One way or another . . . if you must know."

"It could happen. Who is Vetter?"

He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his neck. "I could show you reams of copy written about that guy. I could show you transcripts of statements we've taken down and copies that the police in other cities have sent out. I could show you all that but I can't pull out a picture and I can't drop in a print number on the guy. The people who got to know him and who finally saw him, all seem to be dead."

My voice didn't sound right. "Dead?"

Gerot's hands came down and flattened on the desk. "The guy's a killer. He's wanted every place I could think of. Word has it that he's the one who bumped Tony Briggs in Chicago. When Birdie Cullen was going to sing to the grand jury, somebody was paid fifty thousand to cool him off and Vetter collected from the syndicate. Vetter was paid another ten to knock off the guy who paid him the first time so somebody could move into his spot."

"So far he's only a name, Captain?"

"Not quite. We have a few details on him but we can't give them out. That much you understand, of course."

"Of course. But I'm still interested."

"He's tough. He seems to know

things and do things nobody else would touch. He's a professional gunman in the worst sense of the word and he'll sell that gun as long as the price is right."

Helen crossed her legs with a motion that brought her whole body into play. "Supposing, Captain, that this Vetter was a friend of Jack Cooley? Supposing he got mad at the thought of his friend being killed and wanted to do something about it?"

Gerot said, "Go on."

"What would you do, Captain?"

The smile went up one side of his face. "Most likely nothing." He sat back again. "Nothing at all . . . until it happened."

"Two birds with one stone, Captain? Let Vetter get Renzo . . . and you get Vetter?"

"The papers would like that," he mused.

"No doubt." Helen seemed to uncoil from the chair. I stood up too and that's when I found out just how shrewd the captain was. He didn't bother to look at Helen at all. His blue eyes were all on me and being very, very sleepy.

"Where do you come in, kid?" he asked me.

Helen said it for me. "Vetter gave him a warning note to hand to Renzo."

Gerot smiled silently and you could see that he had the whole picture in his mind. He had our faces, he knew who she was and all about her, he was thinking of me

and wanted to know all about me. He would. He was that kind of cop. You could tell.

We stood on the steps of the building and the cops coming in gave her the kind of look every man on the street gave her. Appreciative. It made me feel good just to be with her. I said, "He's a smart cop."

"They're all smart. Some are just smarter than others." A look of impatience crossed her face. "He said something . . ."

"Reams of copy?" I suggested.

I was easy for her to smile at. She didn't have to look up or down. Just a turn of her head. "Bright boy."

She took my hand and this time I led the way. I took her to the street I knew. It was off the main drag and the people on it had a look in their eyes you don't see uptown. It was a place where the dames walked at night and followed you into bars if they thought you had an extra buck to pass out.

They're little joints, most of them. They don't have neon lights and padded stools, but when a guy talks he says something and doesn't play games. There's excitement there and always that feeling that something is going to happen.

One of those places was called *The Clipper* and the boys from the *News* made it their hangout. Cagey boys with the big think under their hats. Fast boys with a buck and always ready to pay off on something hot. Guys who took you like you

were and didn't ask too many questions.

My kind of people.

Bucky Edwards was at his usual stool getting a little bit potted because it was his day off. I got the big stare and the exaggerated wink when he saw the blonde which meant I'd finally made good about dragging one in with me. I didn't feel like bragging, though. I brought Helen over, went to introduce her, but Bucky said, "Hi, Helen. Never thought I'd see you out in the daylight," before I could pass on her name.

"Okay, so you caught a show at the Hideaway," I said. "We have something to ask you."

"Come on, Joe. Let the lady ask me alone."

"Lay off. We want to know about Vetter."

The long eyebrows settled down low. He looked at me, then Helen, then back at me again. "You're making big sounds, boy."

I didn't want anyone else in on it. I leaned forward and said, "He's in town, Bucky. He's after Renzo."

He let out a long whistle. "Who else knows about it?"

"Gerot. Renzo. Us."

"There's going to be trouble, sure."

Helen said, "Only for Renzo."

Bucky's head made a slow negative. "You don't know. The rackets boys'll flip their lids at this. If Vetter moves in here there's going to be some mighty big trouble."

My face started working under the bandages. "Renzo's top dog, isn't he?"

Bucky's tongue made a swipe at his lips. "One of 'em. There's a few more. They're not going to like Renzo pulling in trouble like Vetter." For the first time Bucky seemed to really look at us hard. "Vetter is poison. He'll cut into everything and they'll pay off. Sure as shooting, if he sticks around they'll be piling the cabbage in his lap."

"Then everybody'll be after Vetter," I said.

Bucky's face furrowed in a frown. "Uh-uh. I wasn't thinking that." He polished off his drink and set the empty on the bar. "If Vetter's here after Renzo they'll do better nailing Renzo's hide to the wall. Maybe they can stop it before it starts."

It was trouble, all right. The kind I wasn't feeling too bad about.

Bucky stared into his empty glass and said, "They'll bury Renzo or he'll come out of it bigger than ever."

The bartender came down and filled his glass again. I shook my head when he wanted to know what we'd have. "Good story," Bucky said, "if it happens." Then he threw the drink down and Bucky was all finished. His eyes got frosty and he sat there grinning at himself in the mirror with his mind saying things to itself. I knew him too well to say anything else so I nudged Helen and we walked out.

Some days go fast and this was one of them. She was nice to be with and nice to talk to. I wasn't important enough to hide anything from so for one day she opened her life up and fed me pieces of it. She seemed to grow younger as the day wore on and when we reached her apartment the sun was gilding her hair with golden reddish streaks and I was gone, all gone. For one day I was king and there wasn't any trouble. The laughter poured out of us and people stopped to look and laugh back. It was a day to remember when all the days are done with and you're on your last.

I was tired, dead tired. I didn't try to refuse when she told me to come up and I didn't want to. She let me open the door for her and I followed her inside. She had almost started for the kitchen to cook up the bacon and eggs we had talked about when she stopped by the arch leading to the living room.

The voice from the chair said, "Come on in, sugar pie. You too, kid."

And there was Johnny, a nasty smile on his mouth, leering at us.

"How did you get in here?"

He laughed at her. "I do tricks with locks, remember?" His head moved with a short jerk. "Get in here!" There was a flat, nasal tone in his voice.

I moved in beside Helen. My hands kept opening and closing at my side and my breath was coming a little fast in my throat.

"You like kids now, Helen?"

"Shut up, you louse," she said.

His lips peeled back showing his teeth. "The mother type. Old fashioned type, you know." He leered again like it was funny. My chest started to hurt from the breathing. "Too big for a bottle, so . . ."

I grabbed the lamp and let it fly and if the cord hadn't caught in the wall it would have taken his head off. I was all set to go into him but all he had to do to stop me was bring his hand up. The rod was one of those Banker's Specials that were deadly as hell at close range and Johnny looked too much like he wanted to use it for me to move.

He said, "The boss don't like your little arrangement, Helen. It didn't take him long to catch on. Come over here, kid."

I took a half step.

"Closer."

"Now listen carefully, kid. You go home, see. Go home and do what you feel like doing, but stay home and away from this place. You do that and you'll pick up a few bucks from Mr. Renzo. Now after you had it so nice here, you might not want to go home, so just in case you don't, I'm going to show you what's going to happen to you."

I heard Helen's breath suck in with a harsh gasp and my own sounded the same way. You could see what Johnny was setting himself to do and he was letting me know all about it and there wasn't a thing I could do. The gun was pointing

right at my belly even while he jammed his elbows into the arms of the chair to get the leverage for the kick that was going to maim me the rest of my life. His shoe was hard and pointed, a deadly weight that swung like a gentle pendulum.

I saw it coming and thought there might be a chance even yet but I didn't have to take it. From the side of the room Helen said, "Don't move, Johnny. I've got a gun in my hand."

And she had.

The ugly grimace on Johnny's face turned into a snarl when he knew how stupid he'd been in taking his eyes off her to enjoy what he was doing to me.

"Make him drop it, Helen."

"You heard the kid, Johnny."

Johnny dropped the gun. It lay there on the floor and I hooked it with my toe. I picked it up, punched the shells out of the chambers and tossed them under the sofa. The gun followed them.

"Come here, Helen," I said.

I felt her come up behind me and reached around for the .25 automatic in her hand. For a second Johnny's face turned pale and when it did I grinned at him.

Then I threw the .25 under the sofa too.

They look funny when you do things like that. Their little brains don't get it right away and it stuns them or something. I let him get right in the middle of that surprised look before I slammed my fist into

his face and felt his teeth rip loose under my knuckles.

Helen went down on her knees for the gun and I yelled for her to let it alone, then Johnny was on me. At least he thought he was on me. I had his arm over my shoulder, laid him into a hip roll and tumbled him easy. I didn't want too much noise.

I walked up. I took my time. He started to get up and I chopped down on his neck and watched his head bob. I got him twice more in the same place and Johnny simply fell back. His eyes were seeing, his brain thinking and feeling but he couldn't move. While he lay there, I chopped twice again and Johnny's face became blotched and swollen while his eyes screamed in agony.

I put him in a cab downstairs. I told the driver he was drunk and fell and gave him a ten spot from Johnny's own wallet with instructions to take him out to the Hideaway and deliver same to Mr. Renzo. The driver was very sympathetic and took him away.

Then I went back for Helen. She was sitting on the couch waiting for me, the strangeness back in her eyes. She said, "When he finished with you, he would have started on me."

"I know."

"Joe, you did pretty good for a kid."

"I was brought up tough."

"I've seen Johnny take some pretty big guys. He's awfully strong."

"You know what I do for a liv-

ing, Helen? I push a junk car, loaded with iron. There's competition and pretty soon you learn things. Those iron loaders are strong gees too. If they can tumble you, they lift your pay."

"You had a gun, Joe," she reminded me.

And her eyes mellowed into a strange softness that sent chills right through me. They were eyes that called me closer and I couldn't say no to them. I stood there looking at her, wondering what she saw under the bandages.

"Renzo's going after us for that," I said.

"That's right, Joe."

"We'll have to get out of here. You, anyway."

"Later we'll think about it."

"Now, damn it."

Her face seemed to laugh at me. A curious laugh. A strange laugh. A bewildered laugh. There was a sparkling dance to her eyes she kept half veiled and her mouth parted just a little bit. Her tongue touched the tip of her teeth, withdrew and she said, "Now is for something else, Joe. Now is for a woman going back a long time who sees somebody she could have loved then."

I looked at her and held my breath. She was so completely beautiful I ached and I didn't want to make a fool of myself. Not yet.

"Now is for you to kiss me, Joe," she said.

I tasted her.

(To be continued in next issue)

Cordell was washed up. His license was gone, his wife was gone, and his self-respect was gone. All he had was a glass of whiskey and a dead man on the barroom floor.

Die Hard

BY EVAN HUNTER



THE bar was the kind of dimly-lit outhouse you find in any rundown neighborhood, except that it was a little more ragged around the edges. There were blue and white streamers crowding the ceiling, arranged in a criss-cross pattern strung up in celebration of some local hero's return a long time ago. The mirror behind the bar was cracked, and it lifted one half of my face higher than the other. A little to the right of the bar was a door with a sign that cutely said, "Little Boys." The odor seeping through the woodwork wasn't half as cute.

A few stumblebums were spilled over the tables in the joint like a troupe of marionettes with cut strings. I was the only guy standing besides the bartender, and if events followed their customary pattern, I wouldn't be standing long. That's the beauty of a perpetual bender. You know just when you've had all that you

can hold, and you go on from there.

I lifted the shot glass from the bar, and went on from there. When I put the glass down, he was standing by my elbow, a hopeful expression on his face.

"Mr. Cordell?" he asked.

He was a little man with a little voice, one of the many stamped from the mold, a subway-strapper, one of those. He had a round face with a long nose that tried its damnedest to peer into his mouth. His lips were thin and narrow, and his eyes were carrying luggage, heavy luggage.

"Yeah," I said, "I'm Cordell."

He hesitated, looking over his shoulder, and then fastening two pale blue eyes on my face. "I . . . I understand you're a private detective," he said.

I turned my back to him and studied the empty shot glass. "You understand wrong, mister," I said.

"I need help," he went on, "for my son. My son."

"I'm not a detective," I told him, my voice rising slightly. I signalled for the bartender, and he nodded at me from the other end of the bar. The small man moved closer to me.

"My son," he said. "*He's an addict.*"

"That's too bad," I told him, my voice tired.

"I want you to stop them, the ones who made him this way, the ones who keep giving him that . . . that . . . filth!"

"You're asking me to stop the tide, mister," I said. "I couldn't do that if I wanted to. And I don't want to. Leave me alone, will you?"

"Please," he said, "I . . ."

"Look, mister. I'm not interested. Shove off. Blow."

His eyes slitted, and for just one moment the small man became a big man, an outraged man. "What kind of person are you, anyway?" he asked. His voice was thin and tight. "I need your help. I come to you for help. I need you, do you understand?"

The effort seemed to weaken him. He slumped against the bar, pulling a soiled handkerchief from his hip pocket and wiping it across his forehead.

"I can't help you," I said, my voice a little gentler. I was wondering what the hell was keeping the bartender. "I'm not a private detective any more. My license has been revoked, understand? I can't prac-

tice in this state any more."

He stared at me, his head making little nodding movements. When I'd finished speaking, he said, "My son doesn't know about licenses. He knows only the needle. To take the needle away, you don't need a fancy piece of paper."

"No," I agreed. "You need a hell of a lot more than that."

"You'll help me then?"

"No."

He seemed astonished. He opened his hands and his eyes simultaneously and asked, "But why? Why not? Why can't . . . ?"

I banged my glass on the bar and yelled, "Hey, bartender, what the hell are you doing, fermenting it?" I turned to face the little man fully then, and my voice was very low when I spoke. "Mister," I said, "you're wasting your time. I'm not interested, don't you see? Not in your son, or anybody's son. Not even in my own mother's son. Please try to understand, mister. Please understand and just leave me alone. Go back to your nice little apartment and get the hell out of this cruddy dive. Just go. Just go and leave me alone. Please. Do me a favor. Go."

All color drained out of his face. His head pulled in like a turtle's and he murmured, "It's no use, then. No use." He turned and headed for the door just as the bartender ambled over.

"Give me another of the same," I said. I didn't watch the little man leave. I watched the bartender in-

stead, and I watched the way the whiskey spilled from the neck of the bottle over the lip of the glass.

The pistol shots were rapid and short. Two in a row. Two short cracks like the beat of a stick against a snare drum rim. I lifted my head and turned it toward the door just in time to see the small man reach out for the door jamb. He fell against his own hand and began dropping toward the floor slowly, like a blob of butter sliding down a knife. A streak of crimson followed his body down the length of the jamb, and then he collapsed on the floor in a lifeless little ball.

I ran over to the door and threw it wide. The street outside was dark, covered with a filmy rain slick, dimly lighted by a solitary lamp post on the corner. I could hear the staccato click of heels against asphalt, dying out against the blackness of the city, running and fading.

I turned back to the small man. The bartender was already leaning over him.

"You know him?" he asked.

"No."

"Looks to me like you knew him."

I reached up and grabbed the front of the bartender's shirt, twisting it in my fist. "I said I don't know him. Just remember that. When the cops crawl out of the woodwork, just remember I never saw this guy in my life." I pulled his face down to mine. "Think you'll remember?"

"I'll remember," he said.

"Good. Go mix a Pink Lady or something." I shoved him away from me and he walked back to the bar, a sulky look on his face.

I felt for a pulse, knowing damn well I wouldn't find one. I took out the small man's wallet then, and found a driver's license made out to Peter D'Allessio. I scanned his address and then put the license back into the wallet. I turned the plastic leaves, saw several pictures of a nice-looking kid with a prominent nose and light eyes. D'Allessio's son, I figured. The addict. He didn't look like an addict. He had a full face and a big smile spread over it. His teeth were strong and even. I snapped the wallet shut and put it back into D'Allessio's pocket, even though he wouldn't be needing anything in that wallet again.

I passed the bartender and went straight to the phone. I dropped a dime in and then dialed the big 'O' for Operator.

"Your call, please," she said in a crisp voice.

"Give me the police."

"Do you wish to report a crime, sir?"

"No, a strawberry festival."

"Sir?"

"For Pete's sake, get me the police."

I sat in the booth until a tired voice said, "Twelfth Precinct, Cassidy."

"I want to report a murder."

His voice got businesslike. "Where?" I told him.

"Did you witness it?"

"No. I saw the guy die, but I didn't see who did it."

"May I have your name, sir?"

"No," I said, and I hung up.

That was that. My hands were washed. I left the booth and walked straight out of the bar, not looking down at D'Allessio. It was dark in the street, and I hesitated for a moment, wondering where to go now, wondering what to do next. Another bar? Sure, why not? I started walking, and I could hear the moan of the police sirens in the distance as they closed in on the remains of a little man who'd had a big problem.

* * *

She found me at my hotel the next morning.

There was a dead caterpillar in my mouth, bristling with prickly fur. I tried to spit the fur away, but it wouldn't leave. I was sitting there with the sheet pulled over my knees when the knock sounded on the door.

"Who is it?" I called, the effort starting the little hammers going inside my head.

"You don't know me."

"What do you want, then?"

"I want to talk to you."

I shrugged and called, "It should be open. Walk in."

She stepped into the room, closing the door behind her. She was small and dark, with her hair pulled tight against the side of her face and caught in a pony tail at the back of her neck. Her face was a narrow oval

that framed deep brown eyes and a straight nose. Her lips were well-shaped. She wore a white blouse open at the throat, revealing the first subtle rise of the young breasts that filled out the blouse.

"Mr. Cordell?" she asked.

"What do you want?"

"I want to talk to you about Jerry D'Allessio."

"Oh, nuts."

"Did I say something wrong?"

"Sister, call off the hounds. First the old man and now . . ."

She moved across the room and stopped near the bed. "Was Mr. D'Allessio . . . did he contact you, too?"

"He did. He did that."

"He's dead. You know he's dead?"

"I know."

"They did it, Mr. Cordell. They knew he was trying to do something about Jerry. They wanted to shut him up."

"They shut him up fine," I said. I rubbed a hand over the bristle on my chin. "Listen, who's giving me a free publicity ride? Who's parking you people on my doorstep? I'm curious."

Her eyes were serious when she answered. "Everybody knows about you, Mr. Cordell."

"Then you also know I'm no longer practicing. I'm out of business. We held the clearance sale a long while back."

"You're talking about your wife, aren't you?"

It startled me. It startled the hell

out of me because she said it so calmly and because it split a raw wound wide open.

"I think you'd better get the hell out of here," I said.

"It's no secret, so there's nothing to hide," she went on. "It was in all the papers."

"Are you leaving or do you get kicked out on your can?"

Her eyes levelled on mine, and she said, "Don't play it hard, Cor dell. I don't scare."

"Look . . ."

"So your wife was playing around," she said sharply. "So what? You should live in our neighborhood. The wives who *don't* play around are either crippled or dead."

"I don't want to talk about it," I said. I was beginning to tense up. I was beginning to want to smash things.

"He deserved everything you gave him," she said. "He deserved the beating."

"Thanks. The police didn't quite see it your way."

"You shouldn't have used the end of a .45. You should have . . ."

"Little girl," I said, "blow. I don't like rehashing dead cases."

"You died *with* the case, brave man," she said. "You died when they snatched your license."

"Listen . . ."

"What'd you expect? A gold star?" She was standing close to the bed now, her lips skinned back, the blouse swooping low over her breasts as she leaned over. She was offering

but she kept right on talking. "What makes a private eye think he's got rights an ordinary citizen hasn't? Assault with a deadly weapon, wasn't it?"

"She was a tramp," I blurted, "and he was a punk. I should have killed him. I should have killed the louse. I should have . . ."

She was taunting me now, her hands on her hips, her chest thrust out. "You couldn't kill a *corpse*," she said. "You couldn't . . ."

I lashed out with the open palm of my right hand, catching her on the side of her jaw. The blow knocked her half way across the room, and she came back like a wildcat, leaping onto the bed, her fingernails raking the length of my arm.

I was sore. I was good and sore. She was something to smash, and she had started it all, and she was wriggling and squirming under my grip. She kicked out and her skirt rode up over her thighs, exposing a cool white expanse of flesh. The sheet slid down over my knees and I threw her flat on her back and rammed my lips against hers, hard. My hands fumbled with her blouse and then gradually her lips came alive under mine and she stopped struggling and everything was quiet.

My hands were rough.

She'd brought it all back, every bit of it. She'd brought back the picture of Trina with her blond hair cascading down her back, her laughing mouth, her deep eyes, green like a jungle glade. Four months of mar-

riage and then Garth. I should have used the business end on him. I should have squeezed the trigger and kept squeezing until he was just a dirty smear on the rug.

I was trembling with fury now, and I took it out on her. She moaned softly, her arms tight around my neck, yielding to me, her eyes smoky, her lips swollen. She screamed, and the scream was loud in the sun-filtered room. She screamed again and again, and I wanted to scream with her.

And then it was quiet, and she lay back against the pillows, her face flushed, her skirt crumpled around her thighs.

"Will you find Jerry?" she said at last.

"I'll think about it."

"What does that mean?"

"Just what it sounded like. I'll think about it."

"All right." She pulled her skirt down and then stood up, smoothing out her hair. "I'll go. I'll go while you think."

"Sure."

She walked toward the door and turned with her hand on the knob. "Think hard, Matt Cordell," she said.

Then she was gone.

I thought of her and of the fury that had been her body, and she got all mixed up with Trina in my mind. I began to tremble again, the way I always did when I thought of Trina and that night long ago. In my own goddamn bedroom, like a two-bit

floosie and some bum she'd picked up, his hands roaming over her skin, his mouth buried in her throat, his . . .

I slammed my fist into the open palm of my other hand.

This was no good. It was over and done with. They'd dropped charges, but the police felt I wasn't worthy of keeping a license. Where were they now? Mexico for the divorce and then where? *Who cares*, I told myself, *who cares?*

I knew who cared.

The guy who bathed in it every night, enough alcohol to float the *Missouri*. Straight down the gullet, eating a hole in my stomach, but never eating away the scar on my heart.

I dry-washed my face with my hand, trying to blot out the memories. The girl hadn't helped. She hadn't helped at all. She'd only made it worse, the way they all did, all of them after Trina. I found a half-dead soldier in the drawer of the night stand and I poured a stiff one.

I wonder what D'Allessio is addicted to, I thought.

Degree, that's all, degree. Alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, heroin. Degree. All escape. But what could be chasing a young kid like D'Allessio? What ghost was he fighting?

Forget it, I said to myself. Who cares?

I took another drink, and I thought of the kid again, and then I took another. And another. Things were getting nice and fuzzy, and a little

bit warm. The pain was going away, and I felt a big-brother feeling for a kid I'd never met, a kid who bore a cross just like mine. Except his cross had thorns, and they probably stuck into his arms at four hour intervals.

I got up and put on my jacket, and I headed for the address that had been on Peter D'Allessio's driver's license.

* * *

The address I'd memorized belonged to a grey building that poked at the sky like a blackened finger. A blonde sat on the front stoop, rocking a baby carriage. She looked me over when I started up the steps, her face showing disappointment.

I didn't smile. I knew what I looked like, but I didn't give a damn. She took me in for another minute, her gaze shifting from my bloodshot eyes to my matted hair, to the stubble on my chin. Her eyes passed over my rumpled suit and dirty shirt, and then she turned back to rocking the carriage with a vengeance.

I lit a match in the hallway and found "D'Allessio" on a mail box whose front had been pushed in. 3B, the box said. I started up the steps, holding my breath against the stale odors that crawled out of the wood-work.

On the third floor, I stopped in front of 3B and knocked on the door.

I listened as a pair of bare feet shuffled to the doorway. The door swung wide, and a thin girl in a

faded wrapper stood silhouetted against the sunlight that streamed through the window at the other end of the kitchen.

"Well," she said, "who are *you*?"

"Matt Cordell. Who are *you*?"

She smiled the oldest smile in the world and said, "What difference does it make? Who sent you up?"

"Where's Jerry D'Allessio?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Hopped to the ears, probably. Who cares?"

"I care. Who *are* you, sister?"

"His cousin. Marie. Why do you want him?"

"Does he live here?"

"Yeah, him and the old man. 'Cept the old man is dead, and Jerry never comes home. You ain't a cop, are you?" She looked at me hard. "No, you couldn't be a cop."

"No, I couldn't. Where does Jerry usually hang out?"

"Wherever there's H, you'll find Jerry. Sniff out the hoss, and you'll find Jerry standing there with his spoon. You could use a shave, you know."

"I know."

She looked at me again and said, "You might look for Claire Blaney. Later. She knows Jerry."

"A small, dark girl?"

"Small? Dar . . . oh, you're thinking of Edith Rossi. No, this is Claire. This is something else."

"How do you mean?"

"Edith and Jerry were engaged."

"Were?"

"Yeah, no more."

"Why not?"

"Were you ever engaged to a junkie, mister? It's no picnic. Maybe Edith got tired of the things she had to do to get money for him. Maybe she had it right up to here."

"Why does she want to help him, then?"

For a moment, the hard mask dropped from the girl's face, and there was almost a tenderness about her tired eyes. "She remembers, I guess. She remembers sometimes what Jerry used to be like. I guess that's it."

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks for the information."

"Hey, you leaving?"

"Yep."

"Ain't you stayin' for the ball?"

"What ball?"

"We could build a real ball, mister. Just shave, that's all."

I looked at her, my face expressionless. "Thanks," I said. "The beard keeps me warm."

I left her standing in the doorway, a puzzled look on her face. When I reached the street, I glanced down at the blonde. She didn't look up this time. I walked past her and headed for the nearest candy store. I squeezed up to the counter and ordered an egg cream.

A pimply-faced clerk nodded and began mixing it, going very lightly on the milk. He shoved it across the counter at me and I tasted it. I wasn't used to egg creams.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "No good?"

"Fine," I said. I looked at him hard and added, "The monkey don't like it, that's all."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Weighs fifteen pounds, that goddamn monkey, and he's scratching away at my shoulder."

"Yeah?"

"I'd sure like to get rid of it," I said, watching his eyes.

"Try the Bronx Zoo," he answered.

"I tried them. They feed their monkeys bananas."

The clerk didn't bat an eye. He kept staring at me, and then he said, "There's another zoo in Central Park, mister."

"This monkey, chum. He's scratching hell out of . . ."

"You're barking up the wrong tree, mister," the clerk said.

"Where's the right tree?"

He blinked once. "Ask your monkey," he said.

He turned his back and walked down to the other end of the counter. When he came back, he had a match stuck between his teeth and he chewed on it as if it were a licorice stick. I tried a new question.

"Where do I find Claire Blaney?"

He looked at me hard, the match-stick unwavering. "You a bull?"

"Don't make me vomit."

"The red building on the corner." He studied me again. "You can't miss it. She's on the sixth floor. Blaney. Claire Blaney."

"Thanks," I said.

He nodded. "She ain't gonna help your monkey none, mister."

"No?"

"No." He grinned, exposing yellowed teeth. "She's got one of her own."

I paid him and left. The red building was easy to find.

I rapped on the door twice with my knuckles, peering at the numerals in the dimness of the hallway. The door opened quickly, and the girl standing there almost fell out into the hall.

"Oh," she said. She put her hand to her mouth. "What is it?"

"Miss Blaney?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm Miss Blaney." Her voice was hurried, and she kept looking past me down the hallway.

"May I come in?"

"What for? I mean, what do you want?"

"I want to talk about Jerry."

"Oh." She put her hand to her mouth again, and then brushed a wisp of red hair off her forehead. "Jerry. Yes, come in. Come in."

The apartment was a shambles. Dishes were piled in the sink, and empty beer bottles cluttered the floor. The shades were drawn against the sun, and the bed at the far end of the room was unmade.

Claire Blaney glanced at the mess, and then pulled her faded silk robe tighter around her breasts. She was a tall girl, with fiery red hair crowning her head, and arching eyebrows against a high forehead. Her eyes were green, set deep on either side of her nose, nervously darting the way

an addict's eyes will, never focusing on anything. Her throat dropped down to full, rounded breasts that moved gently when she walked, nudging the thin fabric of her robe. She had wide hips and long, tapering legs. The robe was an old one, a little too short, ending just above the knee. It was clasped tight to her waist with a silken sash. Nothing else held it closed.

She took a cigarette from a crumpled package on the table, smoothed it out with her fingers and then thrust it between her lips. She wore no makeup, and her lips were pale and full, dry from a night's sleep. Her fingers trembled when she lit the cigarette.

"What about Jerry?" she asked.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. Listen, are you going to ask me questions? If you're going to ask me questions, you can leave right now. I'm expecting someone."

"Jerry?"

"No."

"Who?"

"Someone."

"The Man?" I asked.

Her eyes opened wide. "What?"

"Honey, I've seen enough to know someone who's waiting for The Man. You haven't had your shot yet, have you?"

"Nobody asked you."

"When's he coming?"

She glanced at the clock on the wall. "He should have been here already. Dammit, where is he?"

She began to pace the room, her shoulders straight, her breasts rhythmically moving from side to side with each step she took.

"Why was Peter D'Allessio rubbed?" I asked.

"How the hell should I know? Are you a cop?"

"No."

"How the hell should I know?" she repeated.

"What's Jerry got himself into?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nobody rubs a junkie's father because he's going to the police. One junkie more or less doesn't mean beans to a pusher."

"So?"

"So why? Why kill the old man? I keep asking myself that."

"Go find out if you're so damned interested." She looked up at the clock again. "Where the hell is he?"

"He'll be here. Relax."

"He'd better be here. He'd better be here damn soon. Man, I'm overdue."

She crossed to the table and leaned over to put out her cigarette. The robe fell open across her breasts, and I stared down the open front, my eyes caressing her flesh.

She looked up suddenly. "What the hell are you staring at?"

"The scenery," I replied.

"Well, cut it out. I don't like it."

"Then close your robe."

She pulled the front of her robe closed in an indignant motion. Then she began pacing again. It was beginning to eat at her. It was begin-

ning to get under her skin and crawl in her blood. I could see a fine film of sweat on her forehead. Her hands were really shaking now, and she kept pulling at the robe. She scratched at her head, then raked her long nails over the skin on her arms. She bit her lips, glanced at the clock again.

"Jeez, what's keeping him? What's keeping him?"

She walked to the bed and sat down. She got up almost instantly and began walking again. I watched her as she began shivering violently. Her teeth were chattering now, and her face looked as if it were ready to fall apart.

"Easy," I said. "Easy."

"Get out of here," she shrieked. "It's indecent. I won't have you watching me."

"Easy," I told her.

She walked to the table and reached into the crumpled pack for another cigarette, throwing it away when she found the pack to be empty. I took out a cigarette and offered it to her. Greedily, she snatched at it, and I lit it for her while she continued to shiver.

She turned away suddenly and said, "I'm itchy. I'm itchy all over. Like bugs were on me. All over, crawling all over me."

She unloosened the sash at her waist and threw the robe open, exposing her hard, flat stomach, and the curving whiteness of her hips and thighs. She didn't care about me now. She only cared about the mon-

key who was tearing her shoulder to shreds. She ran to the bed and yelled, "God, God," throwing herself forward onto the mattress. She wriggled frantically and her back arched high into the air, her leg muscles straining. She subsided in a sobbing heap and shouted, "Where is he? Where is he?"

Her back arched again, her breasts high, every muscle in her body quivering with the longing for the drug.

"Come here," she pleaded. "Do something. Do something for me. Do something. Do something."

I walked to the bed and stroked her body gently. She trembled violently, the breath raging into her lungs.

"Do something! Do something! Please, please, please."

I slapped her across the face. "Snap out of it," I said.

"Again, again. Hit me again. Please, please."

I hit her harder this time, and she moaned softly and reached up, throwing her arms around my neck. Her teeth clamped onto my neck, and she became a writhing, wriggling animal, her screams tearing across the room. I shoved her away and she flopped back onto the mattress, her eyes wide.

Nothing can help a junkie but the junk.

When I left her, she was still moaning on the bed, still crying for The Man who could put her out of her misery. On the way down, I passed a short, dark guy in a loud

sports shirt, a package under his arm.

"You'd better hurry," I told him. "You're about to lose a customer."

He grunted and kept walking up the steps, looking back once to study my face more closely. I studied his face, too, and then I walked down to the ground floor and instead of going out of the building, I went behind the steps and sat on one of the garbage cans there.

I waited for about fifteen minutes, and then I heard light steps coming down the stairs. When the steps reached the ground floor, I peeked out and saw the loud sports shirt drifting for the front door. I gave him a chance to reach the street, and then I started after him.

With that shirt, you could have tailed him in a snowstorm. It was yellow and green, and it stood out like a beacon for foundering ships. I kept walking after him, quickening my pace when he did, never taking my eyes from the shirt. He turned a corner after we'd walked three blocks, and I ran to the corner, anxious not to lose him. I rounded the corner at a trot and walked right into the business end of a Colt .38.

"What is it, chum?" he asked. He had a thin, suspicious face with heavy brows and dark brown eyes. He sported a little moustache under his nose, and his teeth protruded over his lower lip.

"Put up the artillery," I said, "this is a friendly visit."

"I ain't got no friends, chum," he told me.

"Claire Blaney's one of your friends, isn't she?"

He kept the .38 levelled at my stomach, shielded from the street by his body.

"What if she is a friend?"

"Is Jerry D'Allessio a friend, too?"

"What's your game, chum?"

"I want to know who killed Peter D'Allessio."

"Why?"

"I just want to know."

He pointed the gun downward suggestively. "You want to keep that, you better get the hell out of this neighborhood."

"That right?"

"That's right, chum."

I nodded. "Okay. Suits me fine."

I started to turn away from him, and then I brought my right fist around in a short chop to his gut. He was about to trigger off a shot when I brought the edge of my left hand down on his wrist. He bellowed and dropped the gun, and I kicked it clattering across the sidewalk. I grabbed him then and gave him another hard right on his shoulder, bringing the hard edge of my hand down like a knife. He brought his shoulder up in pain, and his face screwed up into a tight knot.

"Where's Jerry?" I asked.

"I don't know."

I backhanded him across the mouth, and a spurt of blood appeared at the corner of his lips. "Junior, I'm not kidding. I almost killed a lot of guys, and I'm ready to go all the way with you. Where is he?"

"Wise up. I don't know."

"I'll wise up," I told him. I slapped him again, harder. "Where is he?"

"So help me, I don't know."

This time I gave him my fist, square in his mouth. He was spitting teeth when he finally decided to talk.

"All right, all right, I'll show you."

"This better be straight goods."

"The goods," he said. "The goods. Honest."

I picked his .38 out of the gutter and tucked it into my waistband. I shoved him ahead of me, and then, we started out to find the junkie whose father had died.

* * *

The sports shirt left me outside a small door in a narrow alley. He pointed to the door, and then he took off like a big bird, his mouth still bleeding.

I lifted my hand and rapped on the door.

There was no sound inside, no light.

I rapped again.

"Yes, who is it?" a voice whispered.

"A visitor."

"Go away."

"Open up, D'Allessio," I said.

"Go away, damn it."

"You want it broken in?"

"Yeah, break it in. Go ahead, break it in."

I backed up to the opposite wall of the alley and shoved the sole of my foot against it. When my shoul-

der hit the door, it splintered with a rushing crack of old wood, and I stumbled into the room, fighting for balance.

I felt around for a light overhead, finally located the pull chain. I yanked it, and a dim bulb splashed some feeble light into the small room.

D'Allessio was curled up against the wall, his feet tucked up under him on the bed.

This wasn't the D'Allessio I'd seen in the wallet. The same long nose was there, and the same pale eyes — but the face was thin, the skin pulled in tight under his cheekbones. His lips were bloodless, and his exposed arms bore the telltale scars of thousands of injections.

It was his eyes that told the whole story, though. They blinked like blind whirlpools in his head, the pupils large and black, rounded and staring. Haunted eyes. Eyes possessed of a ghost, a ghost named heroin.

"D'Allessio?" I asked.

"Who's the strong man? Who's the man goes around breaking doors?"

"Matt Cordell," I told him.

"Matt Cordell." He gave a low chuckle that died in his throat. "The disillusioned peeper." He chuckled again, huddled against the wall like a skinny pack rat.

"Your father wanted me to find you," I said. "That was before someone killed him."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. He wanted me to find you so he could take you off the stuff. Your father had pipe dreams."

"Don't I know it!" He chuckled again, his teeth flashing in his gaunt face. "Shake the monkey? Like fun. Lexington, he said. Lexington, Kentucky. Man, he had rocks. That goddamn penal colony?"

"They cure people there," I said.

"Sure, criminals. I'm no criminal."

"You are now," I said.

"What?"

"He was only trying to help you, Jerry. You had no reason to shoot him."

D'Allessio sat up on the bed, and his eyes were wider now, still staring, still lifeless. "You're off your rocker," he said.

"Who else? Cousin Marie? She's busy enough. Claire? For what purpose? Hoss is everything to her, the way it is to you. Edith Rossi? She was trying to help you, and she knew your father was doing the same thing."

"You've flipped your cork, Cordell. Go break your way out of here. I'm sleepy."

"I thought maybe the pushers did it, but what for? You're dirt to them, Jerry. Dirt under their feet. Your father was a danger to only one person alive — the person he might've told the police about when I wouldn't help. You."

The gun came up from beneath the pillow before I could reach for the .38 in my waistband. D'Allessio

held it steady, and he grinned over it, still lying full length on the bed.

When he spoke, he spoke slowly, separating the two words. "So what?" he said.

"So nothing. Your father's going to cure you after all, Jerry. There's no better cure than the electric chair. That's the only permanent cure."

"And who's going to *take* me to the chair?" he asked.

"Me."

"Ha. Joke."

"Sure," I said, "me. I'm going to take that gun away from you in about three seconds, and then I'm going to make a citizen's arrest and cart you down to Homicide. Me."

"You must be tired of living," he said.

"That's it, friend, that's it exactly. I just don't give a damn, you see. You can shoot me but you'll get it anyway, and if you kill me, you'll be doing me a favor. Like a mutual friend said, I died a long time ago." I took a step closer to the bed. "Give me the gun, kid."

"Stay where you are," he shouted. He was sitting up now, his trousers rumpled over his knees, the needle marks showing on his legs, too, marks he'd killed to keep.

I walked up to the bed, holding out my hand. "Give it to me."

His eyes were wide with fear, and his hand began to tremble. I watched

the trigger finger, watched the skin grow white on his knuckle as the finger tightened.

"Give it to me!" I shouted.

For a second, I thought he was going to shoot. And then he threw himself full length on the bed, the gun clattering to the floor. He began crying, the sobs ripping into his chest.

"I'm no good. I'm no damn good," he said.

"You just took the wrong trolley, kid."

"My own father, my own father. I'm no good."

"Come on, kid," I said. "Come on."

He was still crying when I led him out of that dark alley into the sunshine that spilled onto the pavement. He didn't say a word when the Homicide boys took over. I gave them his gun and told them Ballistics would probably match the bullets in it with the ones found in Peter D'Allessio's body. I didn't wait for their thanks.

I headed for the nearest bar.

I sat and drank, and I thought of the kid and whatever ghost had driven him to drugs and the murder of his own father. The ghost would stay with him right to the end. Ghosts die hard. I know.

I know.

I lifted my glass and I drank.



I'll Make the Arrest

BY CHARLES BECKMAN, JR.

Lt. Mike O'Shegn had a special reason for wanting to nail the kid who'd strangled Pat. He wasn't going to arrest him; he was going to kill him. . . .

IT HADN'T been easy, the way she died.

But then her life had not been easy. It had been a violent episode of raw emotion and bitter struggles and much pain, splashed with a few bright flashes of glory.

And under it all, the everlasting drive.

She had died here on her throne — her dressing table — before the mirror that had hurled her exquisite image back into her vain eyes.

It lay shattered around her, the make-up, facial creams and hundreds of dollars worth of perfume, with the broken jewel box and stained shears. And she was still beautiful, sprawled

across the floor that way, with her golden hair framed about her face and shoulders and the silk robe fallen back from her lovely legs. Still beautiful, even with the purple, swollen throat. . . .

The lab boys were ending their routine. The fingerprints, the photograph flash bulbs, the measurements. Now, a chalk mark outlining her still figure to indicate the position on the floor. Then the boys with the stretcher taking her to her last stage, a cold slab in the morgue.

I bent over her for a moment, hiding from the others the things that should not show in the eyes of a police investigator. I touched her



hand goodbye and something rolled out of her loosely gripped fingers. A plain, gold wedding band. I dropped it in my pocket without a second look.

"This all, lieutenant?"

I nodded. "Wind it up, Hank. Wind it up and lock the door. Go home and get some sleep. I'll make the arrest."

It would be that simple. We all knew who murdered her, of course. The people downstairs had seen him leave the building right after Pat screamed. They saw him run, described his white, sick face. A kid. A silly little punk had ended it like this.

He wouldn't run far. Pat had fought for her life. She'd struck out with the nearest thing at hand in her dying struggle—the shears from her dressing table. We'd examined the blood stains on the blades, the kid's blood.

I went down into the night and where it was dark and alone, I checked my gun because I was going to kill this boy who had strangled Pat.

I drove down to where the kid lived, down to hunky town, the smelly cluster of unpainted shacks huddled like a brood of bedraggled chickens around their mother hen, the smoke-belching iron works. I searched the houses, all drearily alike, until I found a number, then I went up on the rickety porch and knocked on the door. An old woman's voice asked me in.

I'LL MAKE THE ARREST

She was sitting in a chair, reading a book. I looked around. The modest room was furnished in old worn-out scraps of furniture and a threadbare carpet. But it was spotless.

She was a nice old lady, the punk's mother. She had white hair and gold rimmed spectacles and she apologized for not getting up.

"Arthritis," she explained with her patient smile. "I haven't been able to walk for three years now. It's such a bother." She continued to smile, "But it isn't so bad, you know, not really, with Jimmy around. He's a fine boy, my son. You know Jimmy? Well of course," she chuckled softly, "you didn't come to see me." She motioned to a horsehair sofa. "Now you just sit there and be comfortable. Jimmy will be along directly. He went out about two hours ago, but he'll be home soon. We'll have tea and jelly bread when he comes in. Do you like home-made jam, Mr. — Mr. — ?"

"O'Shean. Mike O'Shean," I said roughly.

I asked her about Jimmy. This was easy, since he was the only thing we had in common to talk about. There were some things I had to find out about him since it was becoming apparent that he would not run back and hide here tonight.

I learned that Jimmy was all the family the old lady had. Her eyes trailed off into the distance, in the manner of an elderly person whose present is so mingled with the past that she forgets, at times, which is

reality. "Jimmy has a good job now, you know," she said suddenly, brightly. "He's working for Miss Pat Taylor, you know, the actress? He's driving her car for her. She's a lovely person."

But these were not the things I wanted to know. I asked more questions. Then I learned that Jimmy had a girl. She worked nights in a cafe. I told the old lady that I didn't have time to wait any longer and I went out to hunt up the girl.

I left wondering who was going to put the nice old lady to bed tonight and all the nights after tonight, and who was going to tell her why her boy, Jimmy, wouldn't ever be home again.

In the cafe where his girl worked, I dropped a dime in a pay phone, spun the dial. In a moment, a girl's husky voice answered briskly, "Daily Herald, City desk; Brown speaking."

"Lil."

There was a split second's pause while she drew a quick, sharp breath. She always did that when I called her. I felt sorry for her. She was a nice young kid and I felt sorry that it should be that way for her.

"Hello, Mike. How's the detective business?"

"It stinks. I have a murder. . . ."

"I know," she said softly. "I'm working on the story now."

There was nothing more she would say. That was one of the things I liked about Lil Brown. She knew when to keep her mouth shut. She knew how it had been with Pat and me. So she

knew now to keep her mouth shut.

I told her what I wanted her to do and I gave her Jimmy Barecky's home address.

"Thanks," she said dryly. "You always give me the sweetest little chores. How do you go about telling a nice old lady her son just strangled a woman?"

I hung up. I knew she could handle it. Lil Brown was an extremely capable young woman.

I sat at the counter and ordered a bowl of soup. There was only one waitress in the place. She was thin and tired. Otherwise she was pretty, except for the harried look in her dark eyes. They often had that look, the poor people from down here in hunky town. It, maybe, was the look of people trying to pull themselves out of a sucking quagmire.

It was seldom that they got out of this cluster of shacks around the great, smoke-belching iron works. Usually the smoke got them first, or they went to work in the factories. Pat had dragged herself out, but then she had more to bargain with than the ordinary girl, and she'd suffered no qualms about trading it for the places she'd wanted to go.

When the thin, dark-eyed girl brought the soup, I said, "Your name is Bess?"

Her lips tightened. She shoved a napkin, salt and pepper and a bottle of ketchup in front of me. "I'll save you a lot of words, mister. I don't go out with strangers."

I showed her the badge in my wallet.

"Lieutenant Mike O'Shean, homicide."

She looked frightened. They were all that way, down in this section of town. Mention cop and they got either belligerent or scared. Wearily, I stirred some crackers into the soup.

"You got a boy friend named Jimmy Barecky?"

Her fingers worried the hem of her apron into a tight ball. "Yeah . . . what's wrong? What's wrong with Jimmy?"

I told her bluntly he'd strangled a woman tonight.

She sat down and cried softly with her hands over her face.

I told her what I wanted her to do. I told her I wanted her to help us locate Jimmy. She knew him better than any one else next to his mother. She would most likely know where he was hiding.

She rocked back and forth on the chair, small and huddled, her face a white mask. "If only he hadn't gone to work for that woman. He started changing right away. He used to be so nice to me. He worked hard, studying his books at night. A lawyer, he was gonna be. We was proud of him, Ma Barecky and me. I—he used to tell me how he was in love with me and after he got to be a really sure enough lawyer, he'd get a nice little house somewhere and we'd get married and there'd be a room for his Ma. Then he started working for her." Her lip curled. "All he could talk about was how beautiful she was. He stopped studying his

books and he didn't come around to see me any more. . . ."

I stood up, dropped a half dollar on the counter. "He's in bad trouble, Bess. Hiding out isn't going to help him. And he's hurt, we know that; maybe bleeding to death."

She knotted the apron around her white fingers. "What should we do?"

"Find him. You know the places he might hide. Then you call headquarters. It will go easier on him if he gives himself up."

I told her that, looking her in the eye, with the heavy service revolver, the gun that was going to kill Jimmy, digging into my side.

I wrote a number for her on a paper napkin. Then I walked outside. I might have felt like a heel except that I had long ago lost the capacity to feel much of anything.

There would be a little time to wait out, now. Minutes that would crawl by like crippled beetles. I looked around and saw that I was in the neighborhood where Pat came from. The old house was around the corner and two streets over. I walked down there. I don't know why. Maybe because I would feel closer to her there, for a minute.

It had been ten years. The house looked the same. Maybe a little more dilapidated. The porch sagged more. The yard had more junk in it. The house where Pat Kolojeck was born . . . only her millions of stage and television fans knew her as Pat Taylor, the sweet, clean, average American girl who had been born of nice,

middle-class folks in a respectable small town. The role she played as well off the stage as on.

I pulled open the sagging screen door and went into the only room that had light.

Her old man was sitting there, beside a radio, with a glass of flat beer in his hand, staring blankly ahead of him. He hadn't changed in ten years. He still needed a shave and he still sat around in his smelly socks with his shirt off and his suspenders hanging down. He looked as grey and dirty and defeated as yesterday's newspaper blowing along a gutter.

How a beautiful creature like Pat had sprung from this old lush's loins was one of the wonders of hunky town.

He fastened bleary, vacant eyes on me. His bottom lip hung slackly open. I didn't think he would remember me and I didn't care, but he did after a minute.

"Mike O'Shean," he whispered. "Ain't it?"

I looked around, everywhere but at him, trying to find something of Pat in these smoke-dingy, unpapered walls. Trying to hear a girl's voice from the spent years.

"You ain't been back for ten years, ain't it, Mike?"

I looked at him.

"She's dead, hah, Mike?" he whispered with his loose, dirty mouth. "I heard it on the radio." His eyes roved and settled on the cheap table radio. "I heard it fifteen minutes ago."

I looked at him, wishing I hadn't come here.

"Well, she got there," he mumbled, his voice rambling. "She told me when she left. She said, 'Damn you, Pop. Damn you and hunky town. Next time you see me, I'll be riding in a big car with a chauffeur and I'll spit on you.'" He nodded. "Well, she made it. They say she got on the stage and people paid big money to come see her act. They told me she was on television every week. But I never seen her. You'd think she'd at least bought her old daddy a television set so's he could see her," he muttered. Then he laughed, half to himself. "Once I went up there where she lived in that fine building. I thought she might give her old daddy a little something. But they wouldn't let me in." He laughed, a dry, rasping sound. He shook his head, laughing to himself that way. Then he moved his clouded eyes in my direction again. He squinted, focusing them on me. "You still a cop, Mike? You ain't got no uniform."

"I'm still a cop," I said.

"You know who done it to her?"

I opened my mouth. I said, "I know."

"Why did he do it to her like that, Mike?"

"He was a crazy little kid. A punk. A kill-crazy punk."

"What are you going to do to him, Mike?"

"When I find him," I said, "I'm going to kill him."

Old man Kolojeck stared at me

with his bleary, cataract-clouded eyes and his lips hanging slackly from broken tooth husks. Then he got up from his chair, spilling the glass of flat beer. "Why do you want to kill somebody on account of her?" he whispered so softly I could barely hear him. "You know what she was, Mike? She was my daughter, and you want me to tell you what she was? She was a tramp. That's what. She was a tramp—"

I knocked him down. With my flat hand. It was like slapping down an empty paper bag. He fell over the table, throwing the cheap, plastic-case radio to the floor. Then he cowered there. I felt sick, down in my guts. I took out a twenty dollar bill from my wallet. I put it on the wrecked table beside the old man and I got out of there.

I wished I hadn't gone there. I was a fool to hunt for anything of Pat in dirt and despair. The emptiness and hurt were only worse.

I got in my car and drove to my room. Nearly an hour had passed since I talked with Jimmy Barecky's girl in the cafe. She would be my contact. She would be the tendril that would search through the back alleys and deserted buildings of hunky town until she touched the man who had killed Pat and then I'd have him. I sat down beside the telephone. I took out ten cigarettes. I laid them in a neat, white row on the telephone bench. Then I lit one. When I smoked it down to my finger tips, I lit the second. I promised myself before the

row of ten was gone, the telephone would ring.

I was on number eight when the bell jangled. I picked it up.

"Yeah. Okay, speaking. All right, where? Wait a minute." I got a pencil. "All right, I got that. No, I'm taking it alone."

I put the scrap of paper in my pocket and I went down to where my car was parked in the night.

A police car had just pulled up at the curb. Hank leaned out of the window. "I thought you would be in bed. I was on my way home, and I saw a light in your room."

"I've been waiting for a call."

He looked at my face. "Barecky? You've located him?"

I nodded.

He looked up at me from behind the wheel of the squad car. "Don't you think I'd better. . . ."

"No, I'll take it alone. You get some sleep."

I got in my car and pulled away and drove back to hunky town, to the cinder-covered alleys and the dark, deserted warehouses.

I followed the directions Bess had phoned in and soon I was at the building where Jimmy Barecky was hiding like an animal. It had started to drip out of the murky skies. The big drops spattered on the cinders around my feet.

I went into the building and Bess came out of the shadows. Her face was a patch of whiteness.

"You said it would be all right," she asked anxiously. "You said you

wouldn't hurt him. . . ."

"Where is he?"

"Upstairs. He's hurt. Please don't be rough with him, Mr. O'Shean."

I walked up the stairs, to the boy, Jimmy Barecky, to the pair of hands that had squeezed her life away. . . .

I took out my gun and pushed the safety off. The girl stood behind me, staring with her big eyes. "He's—he's hurt and scared. You don't need—"

I went into the room. Jimmy Barecky was lying on a cot. His thin, fever-reddened face stared at me.

I lifted the gun. Somewhere, I heard the girl scream. The kid pushed one of his palms at me, as if to ward off the bullet. His eyes were big and black and disbelieving.

I wanted to put the bullets where they would hurt the most. I wanted to see him double over his belly, screaming and gagging, the way she must have gagged.

But I didn't press the trigger. Something the old man said got in the way. "Why did he do it to her like that, Mike?" That's what the old man said. And I hadn't an answer. "A kill-crazy punk," I had said. But that wasn't an answer. And there was something else. The wounds from the shears. They should have been around his face or chest, where a person being strangled by him would have struck. But there were no wounds that I could see, standing in front of him. And there was something in the back of my

mind that stopped my finger — call it ten years' training on the force or call it intuition.

"Where are you hurt?" I whispered through my teeth. "Say it fast and say it right."

"Back . . ." the kid gasped. "In my back." He was crying. "Bess said it would be all right if we told where I was. She said it would be better—"

The gun got too heavy to hold. "Where in the back?" I took his shoulder and wrenched him over and he yelled with pain. Twice, he'd gotten it. Twice, below the shoulder blade, between the ribs. Where a strangling person couldn't have reached, or had the strength to drive it in so deep, twice, and pull it out for another stab. . . .

"Tell me," I said.

He was crying and trying to find the right words, because he was afraid I was going to kill him. "I drove her car. But I'd seen her before I went to work for her. I thought she was the cleanest, purest girl in the world. I used to see her in plays and then on television. You know, she was always like your kid sister, or the nice girl down the street. . . ."

We stood there in the dark, empty warehouse, the wide-eyed, thin girl and I, while the rain tapped at the window with gloved fingers and we listened to the nineteen-year-old boy's words. They came halting and painful.

"She advertised for a chauffeur

and I got the job. After a while, I found out she wasn't like everybody thought. Inside, she was cold and hard and she'd do anything to get ahead in her career." His words rambled a little because of the fever burning in him. "There were men . . . a lot of them . . . but only the ones that would do her some good. A rich guy fell in love with her, head of some kind of corporation. The guy had a family and kids. He was going to divorce his wife and marry her. Then, one night, his wife got in Miss Taylor's car when we were driving away from the studio. This guy's wife begged Miss Taylor to leave him alone on account of their kids. She offered to pay a lot of money if Miss Taylor'd leave him alone. She got down on her knees there in the back of the car. It was awful.

"I heard it all, because I was driving. Miss Taylor needed money bad, big money. She wanted to produce a show of her own, that would really put her on top if it went over. But she needed money to do it. So she promised this lady to leave her husband alone for a lot of money. I don't know how this lady got it, but she used to bring her all this money regularly. And Miss Taylor swore to leave her husband alone."

The boy wiped his trembling hand across his face. "I knew about all of this because they'd meet in the car when I was driving. Well, I found out yesterday that Miss

Taylor, after taking the lady's money and swearing she'd leave her husband alone, went right on and got him hooked anyway. After the lady couldn't pay any more money, Miss Taylor talked her husband into getting a divorce from her. I guess he was pretty crazy about Miss Taylor.

"Then, yesterday," the kid swallowed, "I read in the paper where this lady had committed suicide. I thought about it all last night and today, how everybody thought Miss Taylor was such a good, fine lady. And how this man broke up his family and caused his wife to commit suicide on account of her. I went up to her place tonight. I told her to her face what I thought about how she acted. And I said I was going to this man and tell him how Miss Taylor had taken money from his wife to leave him alone and then I was going to tell the newspapers and everybody what kind of a person she was and some of the things that she did that I knew about. She screamed all kinds of things at me. She offered me money to keep quiet. Then she said she wouldn't let anybody wreck her career; it had cost her too much. I turned and started to walk out. Then I felt this burning pain in my back. It hurt awful. It took my breath away and knocked me down to my knees. Then she did it again. I went crazy with pain. I rolled over and I saw her coming at me again with those scissors she'd grabbed up.

She was trying to get at my face. I caught ahold of her throat and held on. . . ." He covered his face with his hands. "I loved her because she was so beautiful. Even while I hated her for being so terrible, I loved her. I didn't want to hurt her. Believe me, Mister."

I put the gun back in my pocket. I was silent for a minute and then I said, "I believe you. . . ."

We called for an ambulance and while we waited, I told the girl and the boy again that it was going to be all right. He wouldn't die from the wounds and the jury would believe him, too. Even a poor kid from hunky town had the right to kill to save his life. And the few people who had known Pat, really known her, would back him up.

After the red lights from the ambulance had disappeared, I walked for a while in the dripping rain. Then I felt in my pocket and took out the little object that had fallen from Pat's dead hand into mine tonight. I wondered why she'd had it in her fingers at that precise moment? No doubt it was just one of the objects her dying grasp had dragged off the dressing table. But I was surprised she had kept it all these years.

It was the small, cheap wedding ring a young police rookie had given to her ten years ago. I had been her first step out of hunky town. She had been everything to me. But to her, that's all I was: a step. A year later, she found other, higher steps, and she left me.

I dropped the ring over the side of a small bridge. I found an all-night cafe and went into the telephone booth and dialed a number.

Lil Brown's weary voice said, "City desk."

"This is Mike."

There was a quick little intake of breath. Then her voice, quite steady, "Hello, policeman. Why the hell don't you go to bed?"

"I thought I might come over to your apartment first for some scrambled eggs if you can leave that rag for a while."

"Sure . . . sure I can. Mike . . . I — ?"

"There's something I want to tell you, kid. You see, everything's all right now. You understand, Lil?"

She said nothing for a long minute. Then she said, "I understand, Mike," and I hung up. I was surprised to feel myself smiling, because I hadn't been smiling for a long, long time.





The Hunted

BY WILLIAM IRISH

The girl came running into the room at the geisha house when Hollinger was lying there attempting to get high on saki. He noticed two things, first: her breathtaking beauty — and the blood all over her dress. . . .

JACK HOLLINGER, U.S.N., up from Yokohama on a forty-eight, swung his arms wildly and shouted, "Shoo!" He squatted cross-legged on the floor in a little paper-walled compartment of the House of Stolen Hours, situated in one of the more pungent alleys of the Yoshiwara, Tokyo's tenderloin. He glanced down at the array of thimble-sized saki cups before him. All of them were empty, but Hollinger hadn't worked up much of a glow over them. A warm spot that felt no bigger than a dime floated pleasantly but without any particular zest behind the waistband of his white tailormades.

He tipped his cap down over one eye and wigwagged his arms some more.

"Outside," he said. "Party no

good. *Joto nai.* Terrible." He made a face.

The geisha ceased her stylized posturing, bowed low and, edging back the paper slide, retreated through it.

The other geisha, who had been kneeling to twang shrill discords on her samisen, let her hands fall from the strings. "Me, too?" she asked. And giggled. Geishas, he had discovered, giggled at nearly everything.

"Yeah, you too. Music very bad. Send the girl back with some more saki. And try to find something bigger I can drink it out of."

The slide eased back into place after her. Hollinger, left alone with his saki-cups and the dancer's discarded outer kimono neatly rolled up in the corner — they seemed to

wear layers of them — scowled at the paper walls. He lit a cigarette and blew a thick blue smoke-spiral into the air. It hung there heavily as if it were too tired to move against the heavy staleness of the room's atmosphere. Hollinger frowned.

"Twenty-four hours shore leave left, and not a laugh on the horizon," he complained. "What a town! I should've stayed aboard and watched the movie. Damnl"

The racket in the public rooms up front where they had been playing billiards all evening seemed to have grown louder. He could hear excited shouts, jabbering voices that topped the raucous blend of phonograph music, clicking roulette wheels, rattling dice cups, and clinking beer glasses. Somebody had started a fight, he guessed. These Japs lost their heads easy. Still, a good fight might take some of the boredom out of his bones. Maybe he'd just . . . *Knock it off, mate*, he told himself. He'd been warned to stay out of trouble this trip.

They were sure as hell taking a long time with that saki. Annoyed, he picked up a little gong-mallet and began to swing it against the round bronze disc dangling between two cross-pieces. He liked the low, sweet noise. He hit the gong again.

There was the sound of feet hurrying across the wooden flooring now, as though a lot of people were running from one place to another. But it remained a considerable distance away, at the front of the big

sprawling establishment.

Something whisked by against the outside of the paper screen walling him in. Like the loose edges of somebody's clothes flirting past. The light was on his side. It was dark out there, so he couldn't see any shadow to go with it. Just that rustling sound and the hasty pat-pat of running feet accompanying it. Whoever it was out there, he was in one hell of a hurry.

The pat-pat went on past until it had nearly died out, then turned, started back again quicker than before. He listened to it the way a man will listen to muffled voices coming from the other side of a thick wall, straining for some snatch of meaning. And then it stopped right opposite where he was. There was an instant's breathless pause.

The slide whirred back suddenly, and a blond girl stumbled in toward him, both arms stretched out in mute appeal for help. He was on his feet by the time she'd covered the short space between them. He got a blurred impression of what she looked like as she threw herself against him, panting and trembling within the circle of his arms.

She was all in. Her blond hair fell over her forehead in a disordered, brilliant splash. Two or three flecks of red spattered the front of her gold evening gown. The gown was cut low, swooping over well-formed breasts, dropping in a wide V. She was barefoot, he noticed, but you always had to leave your shoes at

the door when you came in. Her face was attractive, with wide-spaced brown eyes, a full, sensuous mouth. Her breathing was the quick, agonized panting of a hunted thing.

Hollinger looked down into her eyes — and whistled. He could tell by the contraction of the pupils that she'd been drugged. An opium pill, maybe, or a strong dose of morphine. He couldn't be sure whether it hadn't taken effect yet or whether she was just coming out of it.

Sound suddenly broke from her lips, and she sobbed against his shoulder. "Say you're real. Please. Tell me I'm not seeing things." Her fingers pressed hard against his chest. "Hide me. Don't let them get me. I didn't do it, believe me. I *know* I didn't do it."

He had squared off toward the opening in the slide because the tramping of feet was coming this way now and he wanted to be ready.

She pulled at his jumper, wringing it with her fingers. "No, don't fight them. Don't you see — that would be the worst thing you could do. It's not just people, it's the police!"

Police? Hollinger swore. He took a quick step over and slammed the slide shut. He kept his hand on it tentatively, as though not sure of his next move. He thought briefly of the warning he'd got before leaving the ship, and the idea of the

brig for thirty days didn't exactly appeal to him. But — this girl. An American, and in a jam and . . .

"Why are they after you?" he asked suddenly. "What did you do?"

"They think I . . . I murdered the man I came in with. I found him stabbed to death . . . just now . . . just now in the room with me when . . . when I woke up. I know it sounds silly, I know. They'll never believe it. It's too . . ." She broke off, shaking her head in despair. She opened her hands wide, indicating the crimson flecks on her bodice. "This blood all over me . . . and the dagger in my lap when they came in . . . oh please, please, get me out of this awful place. Please! I know I didn't do it. I *couldn't* have . . ."

He eyed her ruefully.

She seemed to sense what was passing in his mind. She smiled wanly. "No. No, it wasn't anything like that. I'm not . . . the man was my fiance. We were going to be married tomorrow. We were slumming. We stopped in here . . ."

His indecision didn't last long. There wasn't time. The footsteps were loud in the corridor now. And then they stopped right next door. Hollinger grabbed up the geisha's discarded robe. "Get into this," he said. "Quick. They'll be in here in a second. Maybe we can swing it." He jumped back to where he was sitting originally, collapsed cross-

legged on the floor. The girl worked quickly wrapping the robe around her. He pulled her down beside him, snatched off his white cap, poked it inside-out and jammed it down over her telltale golden hair.

He pulled her against him, surprised at the warmth of her, surprised at the way she molded herself to him. "I'm sorry," he said, "but this is our only chance. Keep your face turned away from the door. Don't let that dress show through the kimono."

"Suppose they talk Japanese to me?"

"I'll do all the talking. You just giggle the way all these gals do." His arm tightened around her, and he felt her body tremble involuntarily. "Okay now, this is it. Here they are."

The slide hissed back. Three bandy-legged policemen stood squinting into the lantern light. Behind them was a fourth little man in plainclothes. And in back of him, craning and goggling, was a huddled group of curious customers.

Hollinger put down one of the saki-cups, wiped his mouth with his free hand. "Well," he said slowly, "what's the attraction?" He stared at them belligerently. "Go on, beat it! Scram."

"You see gal?" the detective demanded. "You see yellow-hair gal run by here." He smiled deferentially. "'Merican gal, sir. Like you."

"I haven't seen any gal but Mitsu-san here." He stared at the

detective. "I don't think I like your barging in here like a damned . . ."

The plain-clothesman smiled at Hollinger and then snapped something in Japanese at the girl. Hollinger's growl turned nasty.

"Listen," he said. "You want to get kicked out of here on your backside?"

The girl, quaking against him, managed to produce a high-pitched giggle. Hollinger warmed inside, pulled her closer to him.

"Fool gal," the detective snapped contemptuously. His mind seemed to grasp the fact that he was facing an American sailor, and he turned quickly, bowing at the waist. "So sorry to disturb, sir. Pliss overlook." The three policemen bowed, too.

"Sayonara," Hollinger said pointedly. "Goodbye."

The screen slammed shut again. Someone barked a curt order, and the trampling feet moved on. He heard them stopping along the corridor, looking into every cubicle.

"Don't move yet," Hollinger said, his mouth close to the girl's ear. Her head nodded, and she kept quiet as they listened to the retreating footsteps. She moved, finally, ready to straighten up. He caught her quickly as the screen began to ease back again.

He brought his lips down against hers fiercely, covering her face with his own, turning her away from the screen.

"I bring saki you order . . ."

The geisha stopped dead in her

tracks, glancing in slant-eyed surprise at the pair. "You find another girl?" she asked.

Hollinger lifted his head, his blood racing with the memory of that quick kiss. "Yeah, I found a new girl. I like her better than the other girl. So long." He jabbed his thumb at the screen.

The geisha backed out submissively, still peering curiously at the other girl. The slide closed shut with a final whisper.

"Let's go," Hollinger said. The girl straightened and looked up at him, her fingertips pressed wonderingly to her mouth.

"Come on, we've got to step on it. She looked damned suspicious." He jumped to his feet, took a quick look out, then motioned for the girl to follow. She obeyed, holding herself very stiff and straight.

II

The clamor at the front hadn't abated any. Through a gap in the partitions, he caught a glimpse of two white-garbed internes bringing in a stretcher. There was no out that way.

The girl looked at him in terror. "They've trapped us," she said. "We'll never be able to get through all those people. I'm sorry I ever got you into this."

"We'll try the back way. There must be another exit." He threw his arm around her. "Lean against me, like you were dizzy. We're going out for a breath of air, if they

ask us. Take little pigeon-toed steps like you were going to fall flat on your face any minute. Buckle your knees a little, you're too tall. Keep your head down."

They wavered through the maze of paper-walled passageways, sometimes in darkness, sometimes in reflected lantern-light. The place was a labyrinth; all you had to do to make new walls was push a little. The only permanent structure was the four corner-posts and the top-heavy tile roof.

They detoured around one of the slides, sidestepping the police who were returning from the back. A hurrying geisha, carrying refreshments on a tray, brushed against them, apologized.

"We'll make it," he assured her.

The stampeding suddenly started behind them again. Evidently the first geisha had voiced her suspicions. They began to move faster. The wavering gait became a run, the run became tearing headlong flight. He slashed one more of the never-ending screens back into its socket, and they were looking out on a rear garden.

Apple-green and vermillion lanterns bobbed in the breeze, a little humped-back bridge crossing a midget brook; dwarf fir-trees made showy splashes of deeper darkness. It all looked unreal and very pretty — except for the policeman standing there. He turned to face them. They'd come to a dead stop, and they watched him swing

a short, wicked-looking little club on a leather strap.

Hollinger whispered, "I'll handle him. Don't wait, just keep going across that bridge. There must be a way of getting through to the next street over."

The cop said something that sounded like, "*Boydao, boydao!*" and motioned them back with his club.

"Take it!" Hollinger snapped at the girl. He gave her a shove that sent her up one side of the sharply-tilted bridge and down the other. She almost tumbled off into the water.

Hollinger threw himself on the policeman, and they struggled on the fine sand that surfaced the garden path. Hollinger held him in an awkward head lock, his left hand clamped across the Jap's mouth to keep him quiet. His right fist pounded against the bristle-hair skull while the policeman's club lashed out with dull, brutal thuds. The cop bit Hollinger's muffling hand. Hollinger threw his head back, opened his mouth as if to scream, but held the cry in his throat until it died.

The girl stood on the other side of the bridge, her hand held to her lips once more, her body bent forward in the darkness. Hollinger had no time to waste. Lanterns were wavering nearer in the interior of the house, filtering through the paper like blurred, interlocked moons.

He sucked in a deep breath and lifted the squirming cop off the ground, tossing him like a sack into the stream. The bulge of his chest and the sudden strain of his back and shoulder muscles split his tight jumper from throat to waist. There was a petal-shaped splash and the little brown man swiveled there in the sanded hollow, half-stunned by the impact, water coursing shallowly across his abdomen.

Hollinger vaulted across to the girl with a single stretch of his long legs, caught at her as he went by, and pulled her after him. "I told you not to wait. I told you . . ." He clamped his jaws shut, glared at her fiercely. "Come on, let's go."

They found the mouth of an alley giving onto the rear of the garden behind a clump of dwarf firs that were streaked single file along its narrow black length between the walls. Hollinger pushed the hobbling girl in front of him. They came out at the other end into the fuzzy like brightness of one of the Yoshiwara streets.

It was strangely deserted; seemed so, at least, until Hollinger remembered that most of the usual crowd must have been drawn around to the front of the building. They ran down the alley to the end of the block, then turned a corner into another that was even more dismal. But this one was more normally crowded. Heads turned after them, kimoned passersby stopped to stare. A zigzagging bicycle rider

tried to get out of their way, ran into them instead and was toppled over. Hollinger's eyes scanned the crowd, looking for the yellow and black arm bands of the Shore Patrol.

"If the alarm spreads before we can get out of this part of town, we're sunk," he said. "They'll gang up on us. Come on, faster."

"I can't," she whimpered. "It's . . . it's this pavement. The ground's cutting my feet to pieces." He was without shoes, too, but his soles were calloused from deck-scrubbing. He was two arms' length in front of her, hauling her after him. Betraying flashes of gold peeped out from the parachuting kimono, blazing a trail of identification behind them.

She stumbled and bit her lips to keep from crying out. He grabbed her up in both arms, plunging onward with her. The extra weight hardly slowed him at all. He could smell the scent of her hair in his nostrils, deep and musky. His arms tightened around her, and he kept running, faster, faster. A paper streamer hanging downward across the lane got snared in some way by their passage, ripped off its wire and flared out behind his neck like a long loose muffler. The shopkeeper whose stall it had advertised came out sputtering, both arms raised high in denunciation.

"Look, Hollinger muttered, winded. A taxi had just dropped a couple of fares in front of a dance-

hall ahead. Hollinger hailed it with a hoarse shout. Its gears grinded and it came slowly backward. Hollinger let the girl fall on the seat, ran along beside the cab for a minute as the driver went forward again, and then hopped in after her.

"Drive like blazes," he snapped. "Ginza . . . anywhere at all . . . only get us out of here. Fast, savvy? Fast!"

"I go like wind," the driver agreed cheerfully. He stepped on the gas, his head bent forward under its bright golf cap.

The girl was all in. The sudden release of all her pentup tension finished the last of her control. She crumbled against his chest, her head buried in his shoulder, her fingers clutching his arm tightly. He didn't speak to her. He rested his head against the cushions, feeling the slow trembling of her body against his. He pulled in a long shuddering breath, slowly, tasting it like a sip of icy wine. He looked at the teeth-gashes on his hand and felt real pain for the first time.

A sudden diminution of the light around them — a change to the more dignified pearly glow of solitary street lights — marked the end of the Yoshiwara.

At the end of a long five minutes, the girl pulled herself up. "I don't know how to thank you," she said weakly. "I mean . . ." She smiled wearily. ". . . there just aren't any words."

He didn't know what to say, so

he kept quiet.

Her face became suddenly earnest. She brought it close to his, her eyes intensely serious. "I didn't do it! Why, I was going to marry Bob. I came here to . . ." She stopped suddenly, confused.

He looked at her sharply, her words somehow leaving an empty vacuum inside him. He started to reach for her hand, then drew back.

They were coming into the long broad reaches of Ginza now, Tokyo's Broadway. The lights brightened again, glaring against the flattened, charred remains of precision bombing. The familiar smell of mixed wood smoke and dried fish seeped into the open cab. And slowly, the ruins gave way to the city. This was down-town, the show-part of town, modern, conventional, safe. Safe for some people.

"I suppose . . . I should give myself up," she said. "The more I run, the more they'll think I did it. I . . . I lost my head back there . . . the knife and the blood, and that horrible manager yelling at me."

"Suppose you tell me all about it," he urged gently. "I guess we're in this together now." He paused. "You say you didn't do it. All right, that's good enough for me. I don't know who you are, but . . ."

"Brainard," she said. "Evelyn Brainard. I'm from San Francisco."

He said, "Please to meet you, Miss Brainard," and after what had gone on in the past half-hour,

he expected her to smile. She didn't. He took her hand in his own and said, "I'm due back on shipboard tomorrow noon, and we're shoving off for Pearl right after that. If we're going to do anything, we've got to do it fast."

She nodded, her hair reflecting the bright lights outside the cab. They had already reached the lower end of the Ginza, were heading slowly back again.

"We've got to get you off the streets first. Every good cop in the city is probably looking for you by this time. Know anyone here you can hole up with?"

"Not a soul. Bob Mallory was the only one. I just got off the *Empress* yesterday afternoon. I've a room at the Imperial . . ."

"You can't go back there," he said. "If they're not there already, they'll be there damned soon, you can count on that. What about this Mallory . . . where did he hang out?"

"I don't know, he wouldn't tell me. He gave me an evasive answer when I asked him. Somehow I got the idea he didn't want me to find out."

"I thought you were engaged to him."

"I was, but . . ."

"Well, it wouldn't be much help, even if you did know. They'd probably check there as soon as they finished with your own place." They drove on in silence for a minute. Finally, he said, "Look, don't

get offended, but . . . I've had a room since yesterday. It's not much of a place, and my landlord is a crazy bugger, but it would be safe and you could stay there while I . . ."

A small smile tilted the corners of her mouth. "Thanks," she said.

He gave the driver the address. It was a Western-style building in one of the downtown reaches of the city, little better than a shack really — clapboard under a corrugated tin roof. But it had wooden doors and walls. And windows with shades on them.

He said, "Wait in the cab a minute. I'll get the landlord out of the way. Just as well if no one sees you going up."

After he'd gone in, she caught sight of the driver slyly watching her in his rear-view mirror. She quickly lowered her head, but with the terrifying feeling that he'd already seen she was white, even in the dimness of the cab's interior. Hollinger came back and helped her out. "Hurry up. I sent him out to the back on a stall."

Going up the unpainted wooden stairs, she whispered, "The driver. He saw I wasn't Japanese. He may remember later, if he hears . . ."

He made a move to turn and go down again. The sound of the taxi driving off outside reached them, and it was too late to do anything about it.

"We'll have to take a chance," he said.

There was nothing Japanese about the room upstairs. Just a typical cheap lodging house room, universal in appearance. Flaked white-painted iron bedstead, wooden dresser.

She sat on the edge of the bed, wearily pulled off the white cap. Her hair tumbled down to her shoulders in a golden cascade, framing her face. She looked down at her blood-stained gown, and a shiver of revulsion worked over her body.

"Would you like to change. I mean . . ."

She stared at him with wide, frank eyes. "I'd like to. Is there anything? I'd . . . like to."

He yanked a small overnight bag from the top of the dresser, pulled out a clean white jumper and a pair of trousers.

"This is all I've got," he said.

"It'll do fine. I just want to get out of this." She indicated the blood-stained gown again. Then she turned her head, her eyes searching the walls.

"There's just this room," he said softly. "Maybe if I stepped outside."

"No. No," she said quickly. "Don't leave me. Please."

She slipped out of the kimono, turning her back to him. He watched while she lowered one thin strap of her gown. The other strap slid off easily as he watched.

"Tell me all about it," he said. "The whole thing from the beginning. Talk low."

III

"I hadn't seen him in three years. We were engaged before he left the States. He came out here with the Occupation forces in the beginning. Then he stayed on when his hitch was up. I was to come out after him. But he never sent for me."

She sighed deeply, unrolled the jumper and trousers and put them on the bed. She had lowered both straps of the gown, and nothing held it up now but the rich curve of her breasts.

"He kept putting me off. Finally I got tired waiting. I paid my own fare, came out without letting him know. I was getting worried. All this Korean business, and not hearing from him . . . I was getting worried. I didn't tell him I was arriving until night before last. I sent him a cable from the ship. He met me yesterday at Yokohama."

She bent over, pulling the long gown up over her thighs, past the swell of her breasts, over her head. Her hair tumbled down over her outstretched arms. He knew he should turn away, but he sat there watching her. She didn't seem embarrassed. She was engrossed in her story, and she moved swiftly, dropping the gown on the floor, dropping the blood-soiled garment like a loathesome thing.

"He'd changed. He wasn't glad to see me, I could tell that right away. He was afraid of something. Even down there on the pier, while

he was helping me to pass through the customs inspection, he kept glancing nervously at the crowd around us, as if he were being watched or something."

"When we got here, it was even worse. He didn't seem to want to tell me where he lived. He wouldn't talk about himself at all. I'd been sending my letters to the company office — he'd taken a job here, you see — and . . . I just couldn't make head or tail of it. This morning when I woke up, there was a piece of white goods tied around the knob of my door — like a long streamer or scarf. When I happened to mention it to him later on, he turned the ghastliest white. But I couldn't make him talk about that, either."

Hollinger nodded, watching the girl in her underwear now, watching the sharp cones of her bra, the thin material that covered her wide hips. "White's the color of mourning in this country. It's the same as crepe back home."

"I know that now. I'll spare you all the little details. My love for him curled up, withered. I could feel that happening. Do you know what I mean? You can feel it when something like that happens."

"Yes, I know."

The girl pulled the jumper over her head. It came down to her thighs, leaving her long, curved legs exposed. The jumper was large on her, the V in the neck coming down below the line of the bra. She

looked at the fit and suppressed a smile.

"Anyway," she said, "we were sitting in a restaurant tonight and I happened to say, 'Bob, this is dull. Can't you take me to one of the more exciting places?' He didn't seem to want to do that either. As though he were afraid to stray very far off the beaten path."

"Funny," he said.

"We argued about it a little. The girl who was waiting on us must have heard. Because not long after that he was called to the phone and as soon as his back was turned, this waitress came up to me. She said if I wanted to see the real sights, I ought to get him to take me to the Yoshi. The House of the Stolen Hours, she said, was a very nice place. Then Bob came back. And although he'd looked scared when he went to the phone, he was all right now. He said there'd been a mistake . . . no call for him at all.

"It never occurred to me that there could be anything pre-arranged, sinister, about this sequence of events — that it might be a trick to get us in an out-of-the-way place where we couldn't easily get help.

"Like a fool, I didn't tell Bob where I'd found out about the Yoshiwara. I let him think it was my own idea. I had a hard time talking him into taking me there, but finally he gave in."

She pulled on the trousers, held them out from her waist and looked

down in disdain. She took the sash from the kimono, then, doubled the extra fold of material, and knotted it around the waist in a belt. "There," she said. "Let's hope no Commodore sees me."

"What happened next?" he asked.

"Well, we were shown into one of the little rooms and told just where to sit, to enjoy the entertainment."

"There's something right there," he interrupted. "What difference would it have been *where* you sat, when you just unroll mats on the floor? Who told you where to sit?"

"The manager, I guess it was. Yes, he spread out one mat for me, pointed, and I sat down. Then he spread the one for Bob *opposite* mine instead of alongside it. They spread the tea things between us. Mine tasted bitter, but I thought maybe that was on account of drinking it without cream or sugar."

"A mickey," he said. "Plain and simple."

"There was a lantern shining in my face, I remember. My eyes felt small, like pinheads, and the lantern light dazzled them. I began to get terribly sleepy. I asked Bob to change places with me, so I'd have my back to the light. He sat where I'd been, and I moved over to his place."

Hollinger took out a cigarette, offered her one, lighting it for her. She drew in the smoke quickly, let it out in a tall, grey plume..

"A few minutes later it happened.

Even I saw a gleam of light, shining through the screen from the next compartment behind Bob's back — as though someone had opened a slide and gone in there. A big looming shadow hovered over him and then it vanished, and the screen went blank. I was feeling dizzy, and I couldn't be sure if I'd really seen it or not."

She squeezed out the cigarette, stepped on it nervously.

"Bob never made a sound. I thought he was just bending over to pick up his cup at first, but he didn't straighten up again. He . . . he didn't . . ." She threw herself into his arms, the uniform smelling clean and pressed, the scent of her hair mingling with it. "It was awful. He just kept going lower and lower. Then the cup smashed under his chin and he just stayed that way. Just bent in half like that. And then I could see the ivory knob sticking out between his shoulder blades, like a horrible little handle to lift him by. And red ribbons swirling out all around it, ribbons that ran!"

She caught a sob in her throat, held him tighter.

"The last thing I saw was a slit, a two or three-inch gash in the paper screen behind him. My own head got too heavy to hold up and I just fell over sideways on the floor and passed out."

She pushed herself away from him and began pacing the floor.

"But I *know*, I know I was sitting

on the opposite side of the room from him. I *know* I didn't touch him!"

"All right," he said. "All right."

"When I opened my eyes, I was still there in that horrible place, in the flickering lantern light, and he was dead there opposite me, so I knew I hadn't dreamed it. The dream was from then on, until I found you. A nightmare. The slide was just closing, as though someone had been in there with me. I struggled up on one elbow. There was a weight on my hands, and I looked down to see what it was, and there was the knife. It was resting flat across the palm of one hand, the fingers of the other hand folded tight around the ivory hilt. There was blood on the front of my dress, as if the knife had been wiped on it."

That's the symbol of transferring the guilt of the crime to you," he told her.

"Then the slide was shoved back, almost as if they'd been timing me, waiting for me to come to before breaking in and confronting me. The manager came in alone first. He flew into a fury, yelling at me, shrieking at me. I couldn't think of anything to say. He pulled me up by one arm and kept bellowing into my face, You kill! You kill in my house! You make me big disgrace!"

She sat down on the edge of the bed, almost spent, her face showing tired lines.

"I tried to tell him that Bob had

been stabbed through the paper screen from the next compartment, but when I pointed to where the gash had been, it was gone. The paper was perfectly whole. He kept yelling, and then he stamped out to call the police. That was when I left. I got up and ran. I ran the other way, toward the back. I couldn't find my way out, but I remembered hearing your voice when you came in. You . . . you said, 'Here's looking at you, kids,' and I knew you were an American, and I knew I had to find you because that was the only thing that . . . that I could think of."

IV

She sighed deeply. "That's the story, sailor. All of it. And here I am in your clothes. And here you are."

He stood up abruptly. "Here you are, maybe, but I'm on my way back there."

She put one hand on his arm, and he looked at the way she filled out his jumper, shaking his head in mild surprise. "They know you helped me get away," she said. "They must be looking for you, too, by this time. If I let you go back there again . . ."

"Sure they're looking for me. But that's the one place they *won't* be looking. Something sure as hell happened to that slashed paper, and I want to find out what. You say you saw a slit in the paper. When you came to, it was gone.

Well, somebody sure as hell took it. Maybe the manager is in on it. I don't see how they could do that in his house without his knowing it."

He began pacing the room. "I've got to locate the exact compartment you were in, and that may not be easy."

"Wait," she said, "I think I can help you. It's not much to go on but . . . those lanterns in each cubicle . . . did you notice that they all have a character heavily inked on them?"

"In Japanese," he said. "Laundry tickets."

"I know, I know. But the one in our booth was finished in a hurry or something. The artist probably inked his brush too heavily. Anyways, a single drop of ink came to a head at the bottom of the character, with the slope of the lantern. It ran down a little way, left a blurred track ending in a dark blob. It was staring me in the face in the beginning, before I changed places, that's how I know. Here, look . . ."

She took a charred match stick, began drawing on the dressertop. "It's very easy to remember. Two seagulls with bent wings, one above the other. Under them, a simple pot-hook. Then this blot of dried ink hanging down from that like a pendulum. Look for that, and you'll have the cubicle we were in. I don't think they bothered to remove the lantern. They probably wouldn't expect a foreigner to notice a little thing like that."

"Neither would I," he said approvingly. He picked up a razor-blade from the edge of the wash-stand, carefully sheathed it in a fragment of newspaper.

"What's that for?"

"To let myself in with. In some way, paper houses are pretty handy. Lock yourself in here behind me, just to be on the safe side. I'll let you know when I get back. Don't open up for anybody else."

She moved after him to the door. "You'll never make it in that uniform. It's all torn. I shouldn't have taken your clothes. You need them."

"I've dodged S.P.'s before," he said. "Try to get some sleep, and get that dope out of your system."

He turned to go, and she caught at his arm.

"Be careful," she said. "Please be careful." She lifted her lips to his, kissing him gently. "Come back."

"You couldn't keep me away," he said. "Remember what I said about opening doors."

The House of the Stolen Hours seemed deserted.

Hollinger couldn't be sure whether or not the manager slept here after hours or not. The geishas and other employees probably didn't. He took out the razor blade and made a neat hair-line gash down alongside the frame, then another close to the ground, making an L around the lower corner. He lifted it up like a tent-flap and ducked through. It crackled a little,

fell stiffly into place again. He could hear bottled crickets chirping and clacking rhythmically somewhere ahead. He knew that crickets were used as watchdogs in Japan, stopping their chirping whenever a stranger enters a house. He winced as they broke off their song after the first tentative steps he took. He'd have to be careful now, damned careful.

He worked his way forward, feeling his way along the cool slippery wooden flooring with a prehensile toe-and-heel grip, shuffling the multiple deck of screens aside with a little upward hitch that kept them from clicking in their grooves. He waited until he was nearly midway through the house, as far as he could judge, before he lighted his first match. He guarded it carefully with the hollow of his hand, reduced the light to a pink glow. The place seemed deserted.

He tried six of the cubicles before he found the right one. There it was. Traces of Mallory's blood still showed black on the floor. The smeared ink-track on the lantern was just a confirmation. He lit the wick and the lantern bloomed out orange at him, like a newly risen sun.

The location of the blood smears told him which of the four sides to examine. The screen in place at the moment was, as the girl had said, intact. He ran his fingers questioningly over the frame, to see if it felt sticky or damp with newly-applied

paste. It was dry and gave no signs of having been recently inserted. He could see now that the inserts weren't glued into the frame at all. They were caught between the lips of a long, continuous split in the bamboo and held fast by the pressure of the two wood halves closing over them again, bolstered here and there by a wooden nail or peg. They could not be put in in a hurry.

But they *could* be taken out in a hurry!

He shoved it all the way back flush with the two lateral screens, and squinted into the socket. There were *two* frame edges visible, not just one. He caught at the second one, and it slid out empty, bare of paper. But there were telltale little strips and slivers of white all up and down it where the paper had been hastily slashed away.

He stood then and nodded grimly. Probably the frame itself would be unslung tomorrow and sent out to have a new filler put in. Or destroyed. There hadn't been the opportunity tonight, with polize buzzing all over the place. He didn't think, now, that the rest of the staff had been in on it — just the manager and the murderer.

The fact that the girl's last-minute change of position hadn't been revealed to them in time showed that. The geishas waiting on the couple would have tipped them off if they had been accessories. They hadn't, and Mallory had been killed by mistake. But she'd

only arrived the day before — why did they want her out of the way? And why not him?

Hollinger thought about it.

There was no audible warning. But his shifting of the slide had exposed the compartment beyond. And the lantern light, reaching wanly to the far screen threw up a faint gray blur that overlapped his own shadow. The other shadow owned an upraised arm that ended in a sharp downward-projected point.

The dagger came down abruptly. There was no sound. Only the dagger slicing downward in a glittering arc. He threw himself flat on the floor, rolling as he hit. His torn jumper flapped out under him and the dagger pierced the cloth, pinning it to the floor. The other man threw himself on Hollinger, the full weight of his body crushing Hollinger's chest to the floor.

They both had sense enough not to try for the knife. It was jammed in the floor halfway up to the hilt.

Hollinger was flat on his stomach, and the man felt like the sacred mountain of Fujiyama on top of him. He was pinned down by eight inches of steel through a jumper he couldn't work himself out of. He nearly broke his back trying to rear up high enough to swing his shoulders around and get his arms into play.

Clutching, apelike hands found his throat, closed in, tightened

there. He lashed out with the back of his hand, felt the blows glance harmlessly off a satiny jawline. He gave that up as a bad bet, swung his legs up instead. Then he looped them around the big Jap's neck in a tight scissors lock and began to squeeze.

The hands left his throat, and a strangled cry escaped the Jap's lips as he reached for Hollinger's legs. Hollinger let him pry them off—the hold had been a temporary measure anyway, too passive to get any real results. Both men rolled over on the floor, breaking; the Jap scrambled to his feet, blowing like a fish on land.

Hollinger straightened, came up at him swinging. His right went wide, streaked upward into empty air. The Jap cupped a slapping hand to his elbow, gripped the thumb of that hand at the same time. Hollinger felt himself rising from the floor, turning as he vaulted through the empty frame. His back came down with a brutal thud that rattled his teeth. He squirmed on the floor, half-paralyzed. The Jap whirled to face him, stamped both feet in a new position, crouched again.

Jiu-jitsu. Great.

Hollinger watched the Jap circling in like a preying wolf. He stumbled to his feet, weaved around warily, every muscle in his body protesting.

The big hands shot out at him again, open. Dizzily, he lurched to one side, still stunned. The Jap

wasn't quick enough in shifting positions. His legs and shoulders swung, exposing his flank for a second. Through a dizzy haze, Hollinger saw the opening and sent a quick short jab to the Jap's ear. The blow rocked him for an instant, held him long enough for Hollinger to wind up a real one. He lashed out with his fist, catching the Jap right between the eyes. He went over like a ninepin, and Hollinger stood swaying, his bleary eyes watchful.

There was a board-like stiffness about the Jap's middle that caught Hollinger's eye. It had cost the Jap the fight, whatever it was. A wedge of white showed in the kimono opening, below the rise and fall of his huge chest. Underclothing maybe. Whatever it was, it had kept the Jap from pivoting out of range of Hollinger's finishing blow.

Hollinger bent over him, pulled the garment open. Paper. Layer after layer of stiff, board-like paper, rolled around him like a plaster cast extending from ribs to thighs. A narrow sash held it in place.

Hollinger rolled the Jap out of his queer cocoon by pushing him across the floor, like a man laying a carpet. The Jap had evidently slashed the whole square out of the screen first, then quickly slit that into two strips, narrow enough to wind around himself. The knife-gash itself showed up in the second section as it peeled free, the edges driven inward by the knife. Any cop worth

his salt would be able to figure out what had really happened with this to go by.

He shoved it out of the way. Then he straddled the still stunned Jap and gripped him by the throat. "Who was it?" he asked in a low voice. "Who was in there? Who killed the American?"

"No," was the only answer he could get. "No. No."

He slammed the back of his hand into the Jap's face. "Open up, damnit."

"No see. Man go in, come out again. I no know."

He hit the Jap again, harder this time. The big man's eyes went wide with fright.

"Denguchi do," he blurted. "Denguchi do! I no do, he do. He get money for to do, he hired for to do . . ."

"Who hired him?"

The yellow man's eyes glazed.

"Who hired him? Goddamnit, who hired him?"

The eyes closed. The head rolled over heavily. Hollinger swore, got up quickly and then rolled the paper into a long staff. He tucked it under his arm, took it out with him. Nothing more could be done there tonight.

The landlord was snoring in his lighted wall-niche when Hollinger got downtown again. He chased up the stairs past him, shook the knob of the door triumphantly.

"Evelyn, open up. It's me. Open up and listen to the good news."

There wasn't a sound from within.

V

He figured she was in a pretty deep sleep after what she'd been through earlier. He began to rap on the door gently.

"Evelyn," he called, "it's me. Let me in."

A puzzled frown crossed his brow. He knocked on the door a little louder. He crouched down, then, looked through the keyhole. The light was still on inside, and he could make out the pear-shape of the key on the inside of the door.

Alarmed now, he threw his shoulder against the door. The cheap lock tore off on the fourth onslaught. The landlord appeared but was no help at all.

The girl was gone.

Hollinger's eyes swept the room. A corner of the bedding was trailing off onto the floor. One of the cheap net curtains inside the window was torn partly off its rod, as though somebody had clutched at it desparingly. The window was open all the way. There was a tin extension roof just below it, sloping down to the alley below.

It hadn't been the police. They would have come in by the door and left the same way. He thought about the name the Jap had blurted. Denguchi. That was all he had to go on.

Where would they take her? What could they possibly want with her? Just to hold her as hostage, shut her

up about the first murder? He didn't think so. It was *she* they'd meant to get the first time, and not the man. Now they'd come back to correct the mistake. Then why hadn't they killed her right here? Why had they gone to the trouble of taking her with them?

He had a sudden hunch, remembering Evelyn's remark in the taxi: "*He didn't seem to want me to know where he lived.*"

He grabbed the landlord by the shoulder. "How do you find an address in a hurry, an address you don't know?"

"You ask inflammation-lady at telephone exchange . . ."

He grinned. Not so different from home after all. He started shoving the landlord downstairs ahead of him. "Do it for me. I can't speak the lingo. The name's Robert Mallory—and tell her to steer the police over there fast!"

The landlord came out in a moment and threw a "Twenty-five" and a tongue-twisting street name at him.

"Take care of that piece of paper upstairs for me," he shouted. He ran out onto the streets saying the street name over to himself out loud. If he dropped a syllable, Evelyn . . . He left the thought unfinished. He caught a prowling cab and kept repeating the name over and over, even after he was in it.

"I hear," the driver sighed finally. "I catch."

Mallory had done himself well.

His place turned out to be a little bungalow on one of the better-class residential streets.

He didn't waste time on the front door. He hooded the tattered remains of his jumper over his head for padding, bucked one of the ground floor window panes head on. It shattered and he climbed in, nicking his hands a little. A scream sounded through the house.

He ran down the hallway toward a light at the back. As the room swung into his vision, he saw Evelyn, writhing, clutching at her throat. She was bent backward, her breasts thrust against the fabric of the jumper he'd loaned her, a pair of strong brown hands tugging at the scarf wrapped around her throat.

Hollinger caught a faint movement behind the stirring bead curtains bunched over to one side of the entryway. The girl's eyes fled to his, in panic, indicating the curtain.

He caught up a slim teakwood stand quickly, rammed it head on into the curtain at stomach level. A knife slashed out at him. It sliced the air with a menacing whick. He reached out at the brown fist holding it, yanked it close to him, vising it against his chest. Then he shot a punch out about two feet above it.

There was a cry of agony and the man reeled out into the open, a short little barrel in a candy-striped blazer. Hollinger twisted the knife out of his hand, exerting all the pressure his shoulder muscles could put to bear. He brought his fist back, sent

it forward in a short, jabbing motion that knocked the man out cold.

Something white streaked by, and when Hollinger looked over at Evelyn, she was alone, coughing, struggling to unwind the sash around her throat. She staggered forward, fell into his arms with a jerky backward hitch of her elbows, like something working on strings.

A door banged closed somewhere upstairs.

The girl had collapsed into a chair. He found a water tap in a Western-style kitchen adjoining the room, filled the hollows of his hands, came back and wet her throat with it. He did that three or four times until she was breathing normally again.

"That's the girl," he said. "You're a tough one to kill."

She managed a wan smile. "It would have been all over before you got here if she hadn't wanted to . . . to get it out of her system . . . to rub it in that he'd been hers, not mine."

"Who was she?"

Her gaze dropped before his. "His wife," she said slowly. "Legally married to him by the Shinto rites. Poor thing. She . . ."

He shook his head at her. "A nice guy, your boy friend," he said. He turned. "She's still in here someplace. I heard her go upstairs."

She reached out, caught him by the arm. "No," she said, a peculiar look on her face. "I don't think so. She . . . loved him, you see."

He didn't at all. A whiff of sandal-wood incense crept down the stairs, floated in to them, as if to punctuate her cryptic remark.

There was a loud banging at the front door. They listened while the door gave, and then they heard the clack-clack of wooden shoes against the flooring. The police-watch trooped in, flourishing clubs, hemming them in against the wall.

"Now you get here," Hollinger said.

"Hail!" the little detective said, pointing to the professional hatchet man on the floor. Two of the cops began whacking him with their clubs. They turned him over on his face, lashed his hands behind him, and then dragged him out by the feet, Oriental style.

The police had, evidently, been playing steeplechase, picking up the traces Hollinger had been leaving all night long. They had battered the Stolen Hours proprietor, the furled wallpaper, the landlord, and the first taxi driver, the one who must have gone back and betrayed Evelyn's hiding place to Denguchi.

The detective, puffing out his chest like a pouter pigeon, said to Evelyn, "So you do not kill the American. Why you not stay and say so, pliss? You put us to great trouble."

They found her upstairs, as Hollinger had said, behind the locked door, kneeling in death on a satin prayer pillow before a framed photograph of the man Evelyn Brainard

had come out to marry. A pinch of incense sent a thread of smoke curling up before it. Her god.

She had toppled forward, as the ritual prescribed, to show she was not afraid of meeting death. Her hands were tucked under her, firmly clasping the *hara-kiri* knife that had torn her abdomen apart.

She looked pathetic and lovely and small — incapable almost of the act of violence that had been necessary in order to die.

Hollinger looked at the weak mouth and chin on Mallory's photograph inside the frame. Too cowardly to hurt either one, he had hurt both, one unto death. A pair of lovebirds were twittering in a scarlet bamboo cage. A bottle of charcoal ink, a writing brush, a long strip of hastily traced characters lay behind her on the floor.

The detective picked it up, began to read.

"I, Yugiri-san, Mist of the Evening, most unworthy of wives, go now to keep my husband's house in the sky, having unwittingly twice failed to carry out my honored husband's wish . . ."

Evelyn had stayed downstairs, and Hollinger was glad now.

"Don't tell her," he said. "She doesn't have to know. Let her go on thinking the woman was the one who tried to get rid of her, through jealousy. Don't tell her the man she

came out here to marry hired a murderer to get her out of his way because he didn't have the guts to tell her to her face. It's tough enough as it is. Don't tell her."

* * *

It was getting light in Tokyo when they left the police station, walking slowly side by side. They held hands, walking idly, like two lovers anywhere, anytime.

"I guess," she said ruefully, squeezing his hand a little, "I pretty well messed up your shore leave."

He grinned playfully. "I didn't have anything to do, anyway." He snapped his fingers. "Which reminds me. Keep the night of November third open, will you?"

"November third! But that's six months away."

"I know. But that's when we dock in Frisco Bay."

"I will," she said. "I'll keep November third open. There isn't any night I wouldn't keep for you — ever."

Hollinger looked down at her, at the way her body molded the lines of the dress the police had secured for her. Her eyes were bright, and they met his with unveiled honesty.

"There's a little time yet before I make the ship," he said.

She didn't answer. She gripped his hand more tightly, and they walked slowly down the street, bright now in the morning's sunshine.





The Best Motive

BY RICHARD S. PRATHER



There was this lunatic, the girl told Shell Scott, who was going to kill her. It wasn't the cheeriest subject to be discussing in a haunted night club.

THE cab dropped me off on the outskirts of Silver Beach and I looked around before I walked through darkness down the narrow alley. I didn't see anybody who looked like Bruno, the guy Ellen had told me was due for a stretch at the cackle factory. Any guy who'd try twice to kill a sex-charged hunk of dreamy tomato like Ellen had to be one step removed from the net. The crazy guy was probably still around here somewhere; he had been when Ellen phoned me, fright twisting the words in her throat.

I was eighty miles from the Los Angeles office of "Sheldon Scott, Investigations," and I didn't think Bruno had ever seen me. But I'm damned easy to describe: six-two, short-cropped hair, almost white, the same color as my goofy eye-

brows, and the face you might expect on an ex-Marine. I didn't see anybody eyeballing me, so I walked to the alley entrance of The Haunt, a gruesome Silver Beach nightclub with lively corpses and a hot orchestra.

Knowing that Ellen was inside made my throat dryer, my pulse faster. She had a shape like a mating pretzel, and the normal expression in her dark eyes always made me think she was about to tell a pleasantly dirty story. I walked past the grinning Death's head and a luminous skeleton and on into the club, banged against a table and spilled somebody's drink, barked my shin on a chair and got a perfect barrage of highly uncomplimentary language. Man, it was dark.

When my eyes were used to the gloom I saw dark blurs, presumably

people drinking or feeling or whispering in ears, or Christ knows what all. Anything could have been happening in some of those corners, absolutely anything. Strike a match and you're dead. The orchestra was just beginning a number. I expected a funeral march or "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal, You," but it was the bright and bouncy "Love Me."

It was bright and bouncy like Ellen. I'd known the gal only a week, but she was already under my skin. And I felt sorry for her, though it's hard to be sorry for a twenty-three-year-old beauty with a million bucks. But she'd had it tough otherwise: both parents killed when she was nineteen, and the man she loved, her husband Ron, had been killed in a train wreck six months ago.

I found her at one of the small tables on the edge of the dance floor. I took a chance and lit a cigarette, and it was Ellen, strikingly lovely, the warm light melting on her high cheekbones, caressing her red, parted lips, and showing me fright in her dark eyes before the match went out.

"Oh, Shell," she said. "Shell, I'm glad you're here." Her hand slid across the table and found mine, held it. My spine wiggled to "Love Me." "This is a *horrid* place," she added. "Ghastly. I'm half out of my wits."

This wasn't the cheeriest spot for a gal who expected to have her

throat cut by a crazy man. I squeezed her hand, thinking that no matter how dark it was, this had better be the extent of my squeezing. Ellen Benson was a Reno, Nevada gal vacationing at California's Laguna Beach a few miles from here — with Joe Benson. Uh-huh, honeymooning with the new husband. What the hell; I squeezed Mrs. Joe Benson's hand some more.

"The Haunt," I said. "Our motto is 'We scare you to death.' O.K., honey. What's with Bruno?"

Bruno was the crux. Apparently the nut had tried to murder her twice. She and hubby Joe had seen Bruno get off the bus in Laguna Beach yesterday afternoon; last night the trouble had started. She'd been visiting friends in San Clemente; driving back to Laguna, the brakes on her big Caddie went out, but luckily she wasn't hurt. Then, walking from the car to a service station nearby, where she could phone, she'd been shot at. She'd screamed, run to the station, been lucky once more. Tonight, just half an hour ago, she'd seen Bruno again and phoned me. Because she could reach it easily, and because it was dark enough to hide her — or anybody — I'd told her to meet me here at The Haunt.

She said, "He must have followed me, Shell. Again. It's driving me crazy. Joe and I are going to a party tonight — same friends I visited last night — and we were shopping here for gifts for them. I saw

Bruno in front of the shop and told Joe. He told me to get out of sight quick, then went out front to talk to Bruno. I was so terrified I just ran out the back way and phoned you."

I had talked the mess over with both Ellen and hubby Joe last night at the Surf and Sand Hotel in Laguna Beach, where we were all staying. We'd got fairly chummy, and they knew I was from L. A., a private detective vacationing. So when Ellen had got back to the hotel, ready to split at the seams because of the kill attempts, and told Joe what had happened, they'd given me the story. Joe had seemed ready to go to pieces himself. I didn't exactly cotton to the guy, though he seemed nice enough and Ellen had told me he knew everybody in Reno from shoeshine boys to judges, and ex-cons to preachers and they all liked him — probably it's just that I seldom cotton to husbands. A tall, quiet, good-looking man, he'd seemed an odd choice for Ellen. She was hot, sexy, bubbling with life, while Joe impressed me as a guy whose idea of living dangerously was to pick his nose.

I said, "Give me that first Bruno bit again, Ellen."

She said quietly, "After Ron died I was pretty mixed up. This Bruno kept hanging around, but I only went out with him once. He's terribly stupid, and, he's some sort of criminal. I think he was in prison for a while. I couldn't stand him,

but I was nice to him — too nice, I guess. When I told him I wouldn't see him any more he went into an awful rage. Said he loved me, he'd follow me everywhere. He did, too. Then just before Joe and I married a month ago, Bruno caught me on the street in Reno. He sliced the dull edge of a knife across my throat and said if he couldn't have me nobody else could either, he'd kill me. He's crazy, insane." Her voice got tighter. "He *kept* following me around. Joe and I didn't tell anyone where we were going on our honeymoon, so I didn't think I'd have to worry about Bruno — and now he's here, he's even come down *here!*"

"Relax, honey, unwind. What say we have a drink?"

We got two highballs as the orchestra began another number and what I call the gook lights came on. The management was putting on its fluorescent act, and in gook light even Marilyn Monroe would look sexless. Ellen's eyes glowed like blue coals. I peeled my lips back and my teeth glowed horribly.

"Oh, my God," she said. "Don't do that."

"Sad, huh? You look pretty gruesome yourself."

She smiled and her teeth seemed to leap at me. It was disgusting. "Haven't you been here before?"

"No," she said. "Do people come twice?"

"Sure. It's fun. Look at all the hilarious people."

Dim bodies were wiggling on the

dance floor in a whole sea of appalling eyes and teeth that floated in the air. "You ain't seen nothin' yet; pretty quick the skeletons come out." I grinned horribly some more. "But first let's figure what—" I stopped. Somebody was breathing on my neck. In The Haunt you can almost believe it's a ghost's fanny brushing you as it floats by, but this breath was warm, scented with garlic.

I turned around and almost banged into a head angled toward our table. The guy was scrunched over right behind me with his ear practically flapping.

"Hey," I said. "The ear, friend. Do you like the ear? If you do, take it some place else before I remove it."

He jumped back at my first words, his eyes glowing at me. He was alone. I stepped to his table, bent my face down close to his and peered at him. "You get it? Vanish. Get lost."

He didn't say anything. I could see his lips move in an attempt at a smile, but his teeth didn't glow. False teeth wouldn't glow in this light. I sat down with Ellen again and said softly, "This egg looks like nobody I ever saw, what I can see of him. Does Bruno have false teeth?"

"No. Big and crooked, but they aren't false."

"O.K." I looked back at the man behind me. "The ear, friend. I'll take it." He left, and I asked Ellen, "Any chance Bruno could have fol-

lowed you here?"

"I . . . don't think so. I don't think he could have seen me go out and down the alley. It was dark."

I kept thinking about that guy at the next table. The loony Bruno would hardly have anybody else teamed up with him. He sounded like an insanely jealous crackpot, and the crack didn't make him less dangerous. Jealousy is one of the best murder motives I've run across, but the crime of passion is usually swift, vicious. I wanted to know more about Bruno—and I was starting to want out of this creep-joint.

"Maybe we'd better take off, Ellen. Anybody wants trouble, I'm all set." After Ellen had phoned and before I'd left Laguna Beach, I'd strapped on my .38 Colt Special.

"Let me finish my drink first, Shell. I'm not scared when you're around. You're . . . good to be with." Her hand tightened on mine, squeezed gently. "Anyway, you'll have to dance with me once. Maybe it'll calm me down some more."

"Ha," I said, "it won't calm *me* down." I knew what would happen if she laid that long curved body up against me on that dark dance floor. But she was already standing by the table, pulling my hand. I got up.

She sort of oozed into my arms, and into my blood, her free hand restless on the back of my neck. She pressed close against me, following easily, her body soft and warm, even bold. After about a minute of

that I said, "Look. This is lovely, ecstatic, but I, uh, it's too —"

She interrupted. "Shhh. What's the matter?"

"You know damn well what's the matter. What I mean is, hell's bells, after all, you're on your honeymoon —"

"Just a minute." She stopped dancing, put both arms around my neck. "Let me tell you something. Joe wanted me to marry him even before I met Ron, but I just wasn't in love with him. Joe was around all the time, came to the house to see Ron and me while we were married, and after the accident he was wonderful to me, sweet, somebody I could lean on. He was Old Faithful, always there, and good to me — and I thought maybe that was enough. But it wasn't, Shell, and it never will be. A fast honeymoon and a fast divorce, that's it. So there's the sad story of Ellen Benson."

"Joe know how you feel, Ellen?"

"He knows, but he thinks maybe it'll work out. After last night he swore he wouldn't let me out of his sight, and he never did until he went out to see Bruno. He's sweet, Shell; it's just not enough. Now, let's dance."

There was no more conversation until the music ended. We went back to our table and I finished my drink. The gook lighting was still on and I could see two glowing skeletons, or rather waiters dressed in fluorescent skeleton suits with skull hoods, moving around at the

far side of the dance floor.

I asked Ellen, "You about ready to go?"

"One more glug," she said.

I looked out at all the teeth and things again. The two skeletons, looking amazingly lifeless-like, were walking toward our table. Probably something scary was about to happen.

I turned back to Ellen and said, "Glug your glug before we get into the act. Are you afraid of ske —"

It felt like a bony finger poking me in the ribs. For a brief moment light from a pencil flash gleamed on the long-barreled revolver in the man's cloth-covered hand, then flicked over my face and winked out. Ellen gasped, "Shell —"

"Take it easy, honey." I was taking it easy myself. They do some screwy things in The Haunt, but I'd never seen a gun in here before. Maybe it was a gag.

"Look, bony," I said, and that was all I said. I got the gun across my jaw, and a skeleton hand pulled my .38 from its holster, then jerked me out of my seat. The gun jabbed my spine and I was shoved toward the club's entrance.

This was no gag, for sure — and these guys weren't waiters. I stopped, but before I could even think about doing anything, something hard slammed into the back of my skull. I almost went down, and when the guy shoved me I staggered forward. We went out and started down the alley. My head cleared a little as

we reached the back of a building, indented a few feet from the alley. The guy shoved me into its darkness. I stumbled and fell to the soft dirt, still confused, wondering what was coming off.

Then I heard a *click* as he cocked the hammer. I was still down on one knee, and as the knowledge that the guy was actually about to *plug* me jumped in my brain, I acted instinctively, scooping up a handful of soft earth and hurling it toward him, diving to the side and rolling. The gun roared and the bullet dug into earth as I slammed into his legs, grabbed them and yanked. He fell on top of me, and the gun thudded into my arm. Then I was all over him, slicing with the thick edge of my palm, unthinking, just trying to fix him before he fixed me. I felt my hand jar flesh; I saw his face before me and cut at it with all my strength. He went limp. I grabbed him and his head hung like a rag from his neck. I swore, felt for his pulse, jerked off his skull hood, traced my fingers over his split lips, then found the mashed-in bridge of his nose. He was dead.

I didn't know how many other unfriendly guys were back in the club, or what they looked like—but they'd flashed that light in my face and knew me. There was at least one other skeleton there, maybe waiting for this one to return. So two minutes later I walked inside the club wearing the dead man's skeleton suit over my clothes and

the Death's mask over my head, peering out of the eye slits. Deep pockets in the black outfit's pants held my .38 and the dead man's gun. Some girls pointed at my glowing skeleton and giggled. I went to the table where Ellen had been. She was gone. The table top was wet where a drink had been spilled.

A voice behind me said softly, "All right?"

I turned. The scent of garlic filled my nostrils. The man smiled, his false teeth dark in his mouth. I nodded, and he seemed satisfied, walked toward the exit. I followed him outside, grabbed the big revolver by its barrel, and when he started to get into a new Buick parked in the alley, I helped him in, with the butt of the gun on the back of his head.

I got into the car with him, and in a minute he groaned, tried to sit up. I grabbed his coat and yanked him to me.

"Talk fast, you son! Where is she?"

He gasped and sputtered. "What . . . what . . ."

I'd yanked the hood off so he could see my face. He looked ready to pass out.

He babbled that he didn't know what I was talking about, so I swatted him alongside the jaw. His false teeth skidded half out of his mouth, and I kept slapping him with the gun until the choppers landed in his lap.

"You've got two seconds," I said.

I cocked the gun, and as it clicked he yelped, the words distorted and almost unrecognizable, "All right, O.K. She's — stop!"

"Keep it going. All of it. And where is she?"

He fumbled for his teeth. "With Frank Gill. Just picked up her Cad and left. Please, man, watch that gun." He shoved his chipped teeth at his mouth, anxious now, trying to talk even while his teeth clicked in his shaking hands. "You don't want me, man, it's Bruno Karsh. He phoned Sammy Lighter in Reno last night. Sammy sent three of us for the job."

I broke in. "Where is she? I won't ask you again."

"Other side of Laguna Beach, that bad spot, curve and cliff. He'll knock her out and she's . . . she'll go over in her Cad. Frank's got a Ford out there to come back in."

He kept talking as sickness crawled in my stomach. The next time I laid the gun on him was the last time. I locked him in the Buick's trunk to keep him on ice, then I got behind the wheel and roared out of the alley. I hit seventy going up the winding road beyond Laguna, fear and sickness mingling inside me as I thought of that curve ahead. I knew the place; it was bad enough in the daytime, with a hundred-foot drop off the cliff at the road's edge to the sea below. I shoved the accelerator all the way down, thinking of the Cad tumbling end over end off the cliff, Ellen unconscious be-

hind the steering wheel at the start, and at the end . . . I shivered.

The guy laid out in the trunk had told me more of what had happened, and I knew the Sammy Lighter he said Bruno had phoned last night. Lighter was one of the top racket boys in Nevada. Bruno had wired him money, explained the job was to tail Ellen and her husband, grab her the first time she was alone, and "accidentally" kill her. The men had reached Laguna this A.M., tailed Ellen, and had seen her and Joe spot Bruno at the Gift Shop in Silver Beach. When she'd ducked out the back way they'd tailed her to The Haunt.

It looked as though Bruno, after a couple of unsuccessful attempts to kill Ellen, had decided to call in the professionals. It also looked as if Joe Benson had been wise not to let his wife out of his sight. But all Bruno had to do was get Joe away from Ellen, knowing the pros would then pick her up, and he'd managed that.

I was peering through the Buick's windshield and suddenly I saw the two cars a quarter mile ahead, above me at the crest of the road. They seemed to be parked, facing in opposite directions, and I saw a man running to the Ford as the blue Cadillac started to roll down the road toward the curve I knew was ahead of it. I lost them for seconds, tires screaming as I slid around the last curve between us, trying not to look to my left at the awesome

blackness that was the sea there below me, the wall of earth at the road's right only a blur at the corner of my eye.

As I swung around the last curve the Ford was moving toward me; beyond it the Cad picked up speed as it neared the sharp curve fifty feet ahead of it. I flashed past the Ford, right foot on the brake as I started down the incline, my hands slippery with sweat. The Buick ate up the distance between me and the car Ellen was in, but I didn't think I could possibly reach it before it hurtled over the cliff's rim. The Cad was only yards from the drop when I shoved on the brakes with all my strength, knowing that at this speed I'd never stop in time, fighting the wheel as the Buick swerved, drawing alongside the Cad's left as my headlights fell on the blackness almost in front of me. I yanked the wheel to the right and the jar slammed through my wrists into my shoulders as fenders scraped and crashed, the sound grinding in my ears.

The Caddie swerved and my own tires screamed, sliding closer to the edge on my left as I tried to pull the car around the curve. I saw the Cad angling to the right, pulling away from me now, blackness looming all around me, and then, with the car slowing, I felt the left wheels bite at the road's edge, slide in the dirt, drop suddenly. The car shuddered, hung for a moment, and panic leaped in my brain as I threw my body automatically away from

that blackness, clawing for the door handle, jerking at it as the car tilted crazily and moved beneath me. I slammed my feet against the floorboards as the car seemed to jerk and rise above me, and then I half jumped, half fell, through the open door and slammed against the earth, my fingernails ripping and breaking as I clawed at the ground, felt myself sliding backwards, dug with fingers until they bled, then felt the asphalt at my fingertips, pulled myself toward it and sprawled forward on my face.

Behind me I heard pounding from inside the car, hoarse shouts — and suddenly I remembered the man who was in the Buick's trunk. Then the car scraped the cliff's side, crashed with a grating of metal, and there was silence for seconds as it hurtled through the air, followed by a faint splash as it hit the sea. I heard sounds closer to me, looked up. The Cad was a hundred feet away, moving slowly, its side rubbing against the wall of earth at the right edge of the road. I sprinted to it, jerked the brake on.

Ellen lay motionless on the front seat. As I reached for her, light fell on us and I looked back to see the Ford rounding the curve, fast, veering in toward us with brakes squealing. I pushed Ellen to the floorboards, crawled over her and out the door as a gun roared and I saw the Ford stop, its lights off. I grabbed for my .38, yanked it from the deep pocket and dropped on my belly by

the rear wheel of the Cad.

Light winked as a man fired and ran toward me; dirt splashed, inches on my left, and the slug ricocheted away whining. Then I was pulling the trigger of my .38, aiming at the man and pulling the trigger again even as he fell and I heard the slugs smack into his body. I jumped up and ran to him, slapped the gun from his hand and bunched his coat in my fist, jerked him up off the ground. I could feel his blood oozing warmly against my fingers. He coughed and a dark stain spread from his lip to chin.

"Where's Bruno?" I realized I was shouting. He shook his head, coughed again. I kept after him and he talked — for a little while. It was the same story I'd got from the other guy. Gill told me the same things about Bruno, except where he was. Gill also said that after the kill he was to phone the Laguna police and anonymously report the "accident." Then Gill's dead weight hung heavy from my hand and I let him drop to the ground.

It seemed likely that Bruno, perhaps frightened by the mistakes last night, might be fixing himself an iron-clad alibi for tonight's kill. I wondered where Bruno would go if that were true. Probably where there were a lot of people. And right then I remembered some things I hadn't thought about enough; I thought about them. When I finally stood up I was pretty sure I knew where to find Ellen's would-be

killer. I left Gill where he was and went back to Ellen.

After what seemed a long time, her eyes fluttered. She started screaming. "Hey, baby," I said, "this is Shell, remember? Hell, I wouldn't hurt a flea." She kept screaming. And she didn't stop until I remembered I still had on that stupid skeleton suit, minus the mask. No wonder she screamed. She thought she was dead and the ghouls had got her.

When we parked in front of the white two-story house with lights blazing inside all the windows, I told Ellen to wait for me away from the car, then I put the Death's mask on, walked to the door in complete costume, and knocked.

A woman opened the door, then stepped back, one hand at her throat. I could hear laughter and music in the room behind her. "What . . ." she gasped. "What in the world . . ."

She backed away from me; I followed her inside the room. People were talking, drinking. Joe looked up, his face shocked and surprised, then flushing with anger as he walked toward me.

Joe Benson, Ellen's new husband. He had stood out like a bright light once I started wondering about him.

As I'd thought earlier, the crime of passion is usually sudden, seldom carefully planned like this, one — and the *click* of that skeleton's gun

hadn't seemed part of a crazy man's kill. I'd also wondered, finally, how Bruno happened to learn where Ellen was.

Joe shoved me out the door and slammed it behind us. Light fell on his twisted face as he swore at me.

I said softly, "It's all right, she's dead."

In his anger he answered automatically. "But that outfit! And how did you know I was here? None of you knew—" And then he stopped very damned suddenly, his face frightened and ugly, as I pulled off the skeleton hood and he saw my face.

"Now, wait. You don't understand." His voice shook.

"The hell I don't, Benson. I understand a million bucks worth."

His eyes focused on the gun in my hand, and I used it to slam him one between the eyes — and then they stopped focusing.

I dragged him over to the car, shoved him inside, and began to work him over there. At first, I just softened him up, using my fists and not the gun. I didn't give him a chance to cry out; all he could do was moan a little as I kept working on his face. Finally, I took the gun and raked the barrel across his cheek, just once, as hard as I could. That did it. He suddenly started squirming words. He was really trying to please me now.

"Where's Bruno, Joe?"

"House I rented by phone in his name," he mumbled through puffed

lips.

"Where is it?"

He mumbled the address, and I took off my necktie, yanked his hands around in back of him, and bound them together with the necktie. I made the knot as tight as I could, pulling hard until the flesh on his wrists puffed out around the silken tie. Then I locked the car door on his side, shoved him down on the seat, and took off.

It didn't take us long to get to the house, and Joe didn't say a word while we were travelling. He just lay there on the seat, sucking in air through his mouth in huge gulps.

The house was completely dark, and I dragged Joe from the car and shoved him ahead of me up to the front door. I pushed him to one side and tried the knob. It was locked. I turned to Joe and held the barrel of my gun under his nose.

"The key, Joe," I said softly.

"In my coat pocket," he blubered, getting the words out so fast that he almost stumbled over them.

I held the gun on him, fished the key out of his pocket, and opened the door. I grabbed Joe by the elbow, held him in front of me, and pushed him through the open door ahead of me.

From somewhere in front of us, I heard the muffled sounds of movement, something scraping on the floor. I pulled Joe to a stop and felt along the wall until I found the light switch. I flicked the lights on, and a few feet in front of us was a man

sitting on the floor, his hands reaching out for a rope which held his ankles bound together. In back of him were strands of rope that must have come from his wrists.

"Hold it, Bruno," I said, shoving Joe to the floor and pointing the gun at Bruno.

He swivelled his head around and glared at me with eyes that were hate-filled and deadly. Then he caught sight of Joe.

"You dirty son of a bitch!" he screamed. "You tricked me. Where's Ellen?"

Joe just stared at him. I dragged over a chair with my foot, sat down on it, and looked at both of them lying on the floor. I waved the gun back and forth slowly in my hand.

"I think I'll untie him, Joe," I said. "Looks like he wants to get at you."

Joe's eyes rolled toward me and then back to Bruno. "No!" he said quickly. "No!"

"You tipped him off about Ellen, didn't you, Joe," I prompted. "You met him outside the Gift Shop and told him you'd take him to Ellen."

Joe stared at me for a moment, then nodded his head.

"Let's have the rest of it, Joe."

His bloody face twisted up, and then the words began to pour out. "I had to kill her. Had to make it look like an accident and make sure I was in the clear. Half of Reno knew Bruno had threatened her. I knew if I could get him down here when she died he'd be suspected if anyone

was. Sam Lighter in Reno is one of my closest friends; I phoned him yesterday and had him trickle word to Bruno where Ellen was. I figured the fool would come down to pester her if he knew."

His voice trailed off, and he looked at Bruno, staring wild-eyed at him.

"Then you tried to kill Ellen after that, didn't you?" I said.

He pulled his eyes away from Bruno and swung them back to me. "Yes. Lighter let me know when Bruno hopped the L. A. plane, and I checked the bus schedules, made sure Ellen saw him get here. Last night, when she went to Sam Clemente I said I was sick. I followed her in a rented car. I'd messed with her brakes, but that didn't do it so I took the shot at her."

"So when that didn't work," I said, "you got Lighter to send his boys to get Ellen, lured Bruno here, tied him up, faked the accident, and then tried to have me killed because I would be the only one who knew it was murder, and not an accident."

Joe nodded.

"Bruno was your patsy," I went on. "You had an alibi, Lighter's boys wouldn't talk, and once you had let Bruno go free, the heat would be turned on him. All that was left then was to get me out of the way."

Before Joe could say another word, Bruno let out a wild yell, snaked his hand inside his coat, and pulled out a knife, snapping the blade all in one motion.

"Drop it, Bruno," I yelled at him and started to swing the gun on him.

He never even looked at me. He moved forward, fast for a big guy, and I saw the knife flash upwards.

The knife caught Joe in the throat and stayed there. Bruno started to laugh and rock back and forth on the floor. He was still laughing when I picked up the phone and dialed the police. . . .

* * *

I lay in my bed, alone in the wide bed, in my room at the Surf and Sand, and thought about the mess just ended. Bruno was in the clink; Joe was dead; so were some other guys; and two innocent waiters at The Haunt must still be rubbing their sore heads wondering what happened to their skeleton outfits.

I listened to the whisper of the breakers outside and thought about the Bruno gimmick that had made me concentrate on jealousy, a good substantial motive for murder, and

made me wait almost too long to look at the best motive—Ellen's million bucks. That's what Joe wanted, and he had to plan her death when he saw their marriage going on the rocks.

I thought, too, about my own motives. I'd wanted to help Ellen for a lot of reasons. She'd been like a frightened kid; she'd had it tough, even if she did have all that dough. And once, at the beginning, she'd hinted at a fabulous fee for me if I could help. But that wasn't all of it. I suppose I had another motive.

The bathroom door opened and soft light outlined Ellen's full, sensual figure, filtered through the dark lace that hugged her lush curves. It was only for a brief moment, but a moment heavy with promise, and then the light snapped out. I heard her moving through the darkness toward me.

Yeah, I guess I did have another motive. Can you think of a better one?





You don't always murder people by doing things to them. Sometimes you murder people by not doing things. . . .

BY
KENNETH
MILLAR

Shock Treatment

THE woman said, "Do you know, Tom, if I couldn't see our cottage through the trees, I could imagine that nobody had ever been here before. Everything is so absolutely untouched. The air is so wonderfully pure, and the lake is so clear."

The man said, "It's a nice place, all right."

The woman said, "If I could be sure that it would always be like this, I'd like to buy a place up here. It's so peaceful."

The man said, "You've certainly changed your tune. I had the deuce of a time persuading you to come here for the honeymoon."

"I was so wrong, wasn't I, Tom? But you know why it was. My illness makes me sort of timid, and it

makes it a little inconvenient for me to travel. I'm so glad I did, though. I wouldn't exchange the last week for anything."

"That's nice."

"It's true. I'm awfully grateful to you, darling, for widening my horizons again. It seems to me that I hardly left the city for years, until you came along and carried me off to the wilds!"

"Look, Evelyn, can you slow down? I am rowing a boat. For some reason it makes me nervous to have somebody talking a blue streak at me while I'm rowing a boat."

"Do I make you nervous?"

"Shut up!"

"Tom!"

"All right, I'm sorry. But for

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God's sake give me a minute's peace till I get past these shoals. At least don't go coy on me."

"You've been very rude. And I said nothing but lovely things to you. I said you make me feel safe."

"I do, huh? You didn't feel so safe the last time we were out in this boat. I never saw such hysteria."

"I was frightened, Tom. I looked down in the water and I could see the dark stones on the bottom of the lake. Then I looked at you, and we had just had that terrible argument, and I thought you were looking at me so strangely."

"Anybody would have. If you'd seen the look on your own face. And now you're being morbid again."

"I'm sorry I screamed the other day, Tom. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, but I know I did. I guess I'm just an unstable person, with my illness and all. You're sweet to put up with me."

"Tommyrot. But I admit it struck me as unusual on a honeymoon to have my bride look at me suddenly as if I were a murderer or something."

"You're unconsciously very amusing, darling. You're talking as if you had a whole series of honeymoons behind you."

"What did you say?"

"Tom. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I asked you what you said."

"Why, I was just making a joke. I just said something about your talking as if I was the last in a long series

of brides. I didn't mean anything, dear. What's happened to your sense of humor?"

"Nothing's happened to my sense of humor. I just don't think your joke is very funny. That's not the kind of joke I expect my wife to make on my honeymoon."

"Did I hurt your feelings? I'll try not to do it again. You'll just have to keep reminding me, I guess. Doctor Owen says my illness makes me forgetful."

"I'm glad at least that there's a reason for it."

"Tom."

"Yes?"

"Do you know what you called me a minute ago? You called me, 'my wife.' You never called me your wife before, not since the wedding, anyway. I love to hear you call me that."

"You do, huh? O. K., my wife. How do you like that?"

"Don't burlesque it. You'll spoil it. I know, you just think I'm sentimental, but I'm not. I love you, and I love you for very good reasons. You're big and strong and handsome and intelligent and —."

"Oh, can it."

"That's a fine way to talk. I was going to say that you're such a gentleman, too, but you're not being much of a gentleman to-day. My father never talked that way to my mother in his whole life. He was a very great gentleman."

"Stop dragging your father out of the grave to throw in my face."

"Tom! You're beastly."

"I may be beastly, but I've had just about as much of your father as I can stand. My father this, my father that, my father the other thing. The way you talk about him, you'd think you were still a kid in grade school."

"My father was a very fine man. He was a very gracious man, and a very successful man. I expect you to hold his memory in respect."

"Or you'll crack the whip, I suppose? O. K., so I married an heiress. Let us have a brief pause of five minutes for ancestor-worship. Wait a minute while I anchor the boat."

"Oh no, Tom, I don't mean anything like that. It never even comes into my head that I have more money than you."

"But you're saying it. I suppose the things you say reach your tongue without ever passing through your head."

"I *am* a chatterbox, aren't I? Sometimes I wish I was a strong silent person, but I'm just a born chatterbox. Of course my mother taught me that a girl should have a supply of light conversation, and I've always tried to keep the ball rolling."

"Like a snowball rolling downhill."

"You know, you're quite witty to-day, you've said several witty things. I love you when you're sort of gruff and sharp like that and don't really mean it."

"I don't, huh?"

"You're trying to frighten me,

aren't you? You big bad man, you can't scare your little wife."

"Will my wife please lay off my arm? How can I row with somebody holding on to my arm?"

"And what big muscles he's got! The better to hug his little wife."

"Evelyn, you're getting coy again. I know you have a diabetes memory, but —"

"Don't say that word."

"Why not? You're diabetic, aren't you? It's just as good as always talking about 'my illness.' Do you realize that you mention your illness fifty times a day?"

"Well, it's on my mind fifty times a day. It's just that I don't like that word. You wouldn't like it if you had it, either. — Tom."

"I call a spade a spade."

"Tom."

"Yes?"

"It was sweet of you to drive into Bainbridge this morning and get my insulin. Before I was up, too! Weren't you the early bird, though!"

"I'd still like to know how the other bottle got broken."

"Oh, I must have been careless when I put it back in the icebox yesterday. I'm afraid I'm an awfully careless creature."

"Well, don't break *this* bottle. I don't want to have to drive into Bainbridge *every* day. It's a good two hour drive there and back."

"I know. You didn't have any trouble with the druggist did you, on account of my not having my prescription up here with me?"

"No, I explained it to him."

"And you're absolutely sure you got the right kind? I can't take the ordinary kind, you know. You're absolutely certain you got twenty unit protamine-zinc insulin?"

"Of course I'm sure. I wouldn't make a mistake like that."

"Oh, I know you couldn't. That's one of the things I love about you, Tom. You always know exactly what you're doing. You *do* look after me. And you always will, won't you? It's nice of you not to be angry about that argument we had. You're very understanding."

"I may be understanding, but I still don't see how I'm going to get a start in a new business without some capital backing."

"You can get backing, dear. I know a dozen people who will be glad to back you."

"Maybe so. It seems funny, though, that I can't come to my own wife for a little financial backing. That isn't my idea of marriage. My idea of marriage has always been share and share alike."

"There you go again, Tom. You *do* make me laugh."

"What?"

"Talking as if you'd been married before. It's awfully comical to hear a young man like you talking like an old — an old rooster. You're a perfect scream."

"You're changing the subject. You're a great little chatterbox, Evelyn, but don't let anybody tell you you're not hard-headed."

"I am *not* hard-headed. I promised father before he died that I'd never touch those securities. He said that they were the sheet-anchor of my life, and that he'd turn over in his grave if I ever parted with them. I can't break a death-bed promise, Tom."

"Not an ancestor-worshipper like you. I suppose not. O. K., O. K., we'll do it the hard way."

"It *won't* be hard for you to make a loan."

"What's that?"

"I said, it won't be hard for you to make a loan, not if this venture is at all sound. And if you can't get a loan from somebody like George Ralston it means that your enterprise isn't sound and you shouldn't put your money into it in the first place."

"You can skip it. I'm convinced."

"You're not angry with me again, are you, Tom?"

"Why should I be angry?"

"On account of that old argument. Your face looked sort of sad for a minute. You do know I love you, don't you?"

"In your way, I suppose you do."

"My way's a very good way."

"But I think you love your father more, even if he is dead. I feel a little bit like a rival to a ghost."

"What a ghastly notion."

"Not as ghastly as the fact, I sometimes think."

"Now don't be morbid, Tom. Just because I'm following my father's advice in one little matter

doesn't mean that I'm not a good wife to you. I know I can't give you children, but I told you that from the beginning."

"I don't want children."

"It's sweet of you to say that, Tom. But I do. I'd love to bear your children. But I can't have everything, I know that. And I've got so much more than I ever expected to have. You've made me very happy."

"That's great."

"You didn't say that I've made you very happy. Why don't you say that, darling? I have, haven't I?"

"I guess so. How far are we from the dock?"

"Oh, quite near. A couple of hundred yards. Are you tired rowing, darling?"

"No."

"I'm so glad. Isn't the lake beautiful to-day? — It's just as bright blue as a blue-jay's wing. This *is* just like a wilderness. It makes me feel awfully poetic and romantic to be up here with you with no one else around. Do you know, we haven't seen a single other person all day to-day. We're just like Adam and Eve. I'm so glad you made me come up here with you. You know, for years, ever since father died, I've hardly ever left home at all. Of course my illness kept me tied down, but more than that I needed — someone. Someone to take me out of myself. And then you came along. Every now and then I just stop and think, and feel like hugging myself,

to think that you'd pick me. Tom?"

"What?"

"Whatever made you pick poor little me? I know you must have had plenty of other chances, I could see the way the girls looked at you. I was quite jealous at first. And then I saw that I didn't have any reason to be. I'm not a bit jealous any more. Oh, perhaps a little bit. I've got to be a little jealous because I love you so much."

"Hand me the rope, will you? It's in the bottom of the boat there."

"Here it is."

"Thanks. Now be careful when you step out. This dock is kind of unsteady."

"Give me your arm, darling. Oops. There we are. If we decide to buy this place we'll put in a concrete dock like the one they have at the Beach Club."

"Yeah, if we decide to buy it. I mean if *you* decide to buy it."

"Now don't say that, Tom. We don't want to start that old argument again. You know what's mine is yours."

"That's true in a very limited sense."

"Go on with you. You know I'd do anything for my big strong wonderful husband."

"Be careful, Evelyn. I'm trying to get this boat tied up."

"Oh, am I in the way? I'm sorry. All right then, I'll just stand back here and watch you. My, aren't those birches beautiful? They're so straight and clean-looking."

"O. K., what do we do now?
Want to go for a walk?"

"No, not now, darling. It's time
for my injection. I'm afraid I overate
at lunch to-day. Those sandwiches
were *so* good. I'm really a little faint.
May I have your arm, Tom?"

"Feeling sick?"

"No, it's just that this hill is a
little too much for me. I'll be all
right when I have my insulin. There,
that's better. It's so grand to have a
man to lean on. You're an awfully
powerful man, you know. I bet you
played football in college. Did you?"

"A little."

"Where did you go to college,
Tom? I don't believe you ever told
me."

"Didn't I? I thought I did. It was
a little place out west. You never
heard of it."

"You know, darling, I know so
little about you. That's one of the
things that fascinates me, I guess. Of
course I know you've had a lot of ex-
periences, I can see it in your face.
You have the most complex and
interesting face. Did you know that?"

"Skip my face. One pan is like
another."

"What amusing slang you use,
Tom."

"The better to slang you, my
dear. Have you got the key?"

"Yes, here it is. Isn't it fun to get
back to our own little cottage? To
think that this is the first house we
ever shared together. I'll always love
it especially on account of that."

"It's a nice place, all right. It

should be, at the rent we pay."

"Oh, I don't agree. Three hun-
dred a month is remarkably *cheap*
for a place like this. Don't forget it's
furnished."

"Our monetary standards differ,
don't they?"

"Don't worry, you'll get used to
having money. It's such fun, really.
Now will you excuse me? I must
take my injection."

"I think I'll have a drink."

"Yes, do. I'll be back in a minute."

"That's swell. That's just dandy.
I can hardly wait for you to get
back."

"What did you say, Tom? I can't
hear you from the kitchen."

"I said hurry back."

"I will. — Tom?"

"Yes?"

"Is it this green bottle on the top
shelf of the icebox?"

"Yes."

"But it hasn't got any label on it."

"That's funny. The label must
have come off."

"Are you quite quite sure that
this is the right kind? You remem-
ber I wrote it down for you last
night. Protamine-zinc insulin, twenty
units per c. c.?"

"I'm quite quite sure. That's what
I asked for and that's what I got."

"Well, as long as you're sure. It
would be serious if there were a mis-
take."

"I told you I was sure, didn't I?"

"Of course you did. And I'm sure,
too. It's so wonderful to have some-

body I can trust, somebody to look after me for the rest of my life. Ouch."

"What's the matter?"

"I never seem to get used to the needle. It always hurts. You'd think I'd get used to it after taking it once a day for five years."

"Are you finished? Shall I pour you a drink?"

"Yes, please. Just a small one. I'll be with you as soon as I put these things away."

"I can hardly wait."

"I heard what you said. You're sweet. For that you deserve a kiss. There. I hope you'll always be as sweet as you've been on our honeymoon."

"I will."

"What's that, Tom? Is that the label?"

"Yeah, it must have come off when I unwrapped the bottle. I found it in the wastebasket with the wrapping paper."

"Tom. I don't want to alarm you, but the druggist made a mistake. A very serious mistake. We'll have to drive to Bainbridge immediately."

"Why? I was just getting set for a drink."

"Go out and start the car, Tom. I'll come right out."

"Just a minute, just a minute. I'll finish my drink first."

"You don't understand, dear. The druggist sold you the wrong insulin. Dr. Owen gave me a very strict warning about it when I left the city."

"What's that?"

"I have to have a glucose injection immediately, Tom. This is ordinary insulin, eighty units per c. c., and I took two c. c. It will give me insulin shock."

"Is that serious?"

"Tom, you don't know how serious it is. If I don't get to a doctor immediately, I'll die."

"Good God! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Go out and start the car. Quickly."

"I'm going, I'm going. You don't have to order me around."

"Have you got the car-key?"

"Yes, here it is."

"Well, hurry. Start the engine."

"I am hurrying."

"Tom, you still don't understand. This is life and death. If I go into a coma from insulin shock I'll probably never come out. Please hurry, dear."

"O. K. One second."

"Tom! Hurry! You've got to hurry! Don't you know that if I don't get to a doctor I'll die?"

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"If you won't drive, I will. I've got to get to Bainbridge, I tell you. I've got to get to Bainbridge."

"We're *going* to Bainbridge. Get out from behind that wheel. I know it's your car but I happen to be driving this afternoon."

"How can you think of things like that, now? Don't you love me, Tom?"

"Shut up. The carburetor's flooded again."

"Well, *do* something. We can't just sit here. Tom, I've got so little time."

"I *am* doing something. I'm trying to get this darned engine to work. O. K. There she goes."

"You *will* drive as fast as you can, won't you? I think I can feel it already."

"Probably your imagination."

"Don't be so callous, Tom. You don't know how serious this is. I know you've never had a day's illness in your life, so you can't understand these things. But you might at least show a little sympathy."

"What do I do, drive or show sympathy? I can't do both, not on these backwoods roads."

"How fast are we going, Tom? Forty-five isn't very fast, is it?"

"Not for an aeroplane. For an old Pierce-Arrow, on a road like this, it's plenty fast."

"How far is it to Bainbridge?"

"About twenty-five miles. Don't worry, we'll get there in plenty of time."

"We *have* to, Tom. You don't want to become a widower when you've only been married a week."

"That's not funny."

"No, I know it isn't. But it's true."

"You're being morbid again, aren't you?"

"I've got a reason to be morbid. You can't seem to get that through your childish head."

"Childish! That's a curious way to talk. A singularly inappropriate word

for you to apply to anybody else."

"Tom!"

"Yes, auntie. Your little childish Tom is right here beside you."

"Let's not quarrel now. I don't feel well, and if it should happen —"

"If what should happen?"

"If I should die, darling. If I should die, I want you to have a nice memory of me. One thing I'm thankful for, Tom. If I die you'll never have to worry about money again. I made my will before we ever left the city. But I told you that, didn't I?"

"Don't be sentimental, Evelyn. You know perfectly well you're not going to die. But trust a woman to squeeze all the drama she can out of every situation."

"I'm not being dramatic. I've lived on the very edge of death for five years. I am living on the edge of death right this minute."

"Are you?"

"You're quite a cold person, aren't you? I've tried not to see it, but you're cold. I don't think you really love me?"

"If I didn't love you, would I be risking my neck trying to get you to Bainbridge?"

"It's my neck that's in the balance, not yours."

"Oh, it is, eh? I'd like to see you try to handle this car at this speed, on these roads."

"Forty-five miles an hour is not a breakneck speed."

"All right, you try it."

"Why are you stopping, Tom?

Don't stop, you'll waste time. We can't afford to waste time."

"I thought you wanted a turn at the wheel."

"I don't feel well enough to drive. Please go on."

"Let's have no more cracks about my driving, then. I'm doing the best I can."

"Of course you are. I know you're doing your best. You do love me, don't you? You wouldn't flare up at me like that if you didn't. You're just like a little boy."

"Will you please cut out the cracks? You call me a child, or a little boy, just once more, and I'm going to go and take a walk in the woods."

"You wouldn't do that."

"I wouldn't, eh? Just watch me."

"Oh no, no. Please don't stop, Tom, don't leave me. I *must* get to Bainbridge."

"Then watch your speech. I've put up with an awful lot from you in the last week. I'm not going to put up with any more."

"Why, no, you haven't. I've told you that I loved you. Everything I said told you that I loved you."

"Are you contradicting me?"

"Oh no, don't stop. Please forgive me. Yes. I've treated you terribly. Forgive me. Please go on.

"If you stay reasonable, I'll go on. And you're damn right you've treated me terribly. You've done nothing but compare me unfavorably with your wealthy friends. You've gloated over the fact that I've no

money and you have. You've made me feel like a gigolo and a bounder. You've forced me to pay for your money with caresses, even if I didn't feel like it. You've acted in general like the arrogant old maid that you are. The dried up old maid who found a burglar under her bed and made him pay ransom."

"Tom, are you trying to kill me?"

"And now you're accusing me of trying to kill you. Because you, with your rattle-brained empty head, didn't have sense enough to check up on what insulin you were taking before you took it."

"Why did you marry me, Tom? You seem to hate me."

"Do I?"

"Oh, I've been a fool. A fool like me doesn't deserve to live."

"You're not such a fool, my lady. You're a hard-headed businessman if I ever saw one."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know what I mean. You'd send me begging to the bankers for a loan, while you kept your money safe in your sock. Much good may it do you."

"I can't stand any more of that kind of talk. Please don't talk like that. I'm feeling dreadfully faint. My face is getting numb."

"Next time you'll look at the label before you take your stuff."

"Tom, you will take me to Bainbridge, won't you? If I pass out, take me right to a doctor and tell him what happened. Tell him that I took eighty-unit ordinary insulin

instead of twenty-unit protamine-zinc. He'll know what to do."

"Are you insinuating that I don't intend to take you to Bainbridge?"

"No. No. I know you are."

"You see that sign, don't you? Bainbridge ten miles."

"Yes. Hurry, Tom. I'm very weak. Tom! You took the wrong turn. Turn around, quickly. You should have turned to the left."

"Bainbridge is to the right. We're going to Bainbridge."

"No, the sign pointed to the left. Stop the car."

"Get your hand off this wheel. I know where Bainbridge is."

"It's to the left. It's to the left. Bainbridge is to the left."

"I told you to take your hand off this wheel."

"Tom, you've hurt me. You've hurt my arm."

"Well, don't try to kill us both. I happen to be driving this car."

"Where are you driving to? Bainbridge is to the left. I must go to Bainbridge."

"Are you contradicting me again?"

"All right, Tom. Drive where you want to. I don't want to live. After the terrible things you said to me. And I thought we loved each other."

"Whatever that means."

"I don't believe you asked the druggist in Bainbridge for protamine-zinc insulin. You deliberately bought the other, and you knew it would kill me."

"Don't be absurd, Evelyn. There isn't any druggist in Bainbridge."

"Then where —?"

"Why, you bought it yourself before we left the city. Don't you remember, Evelyn? Your memory is tricky, isn't it?"

"Liar! Murderer! Sadist!"

"I'm not really enjoying this, Evelyn. I don't do this for fun."

"What did you say? I can't hear you very well."

"I wish I was afflicted with the same merciful deafness."

"What did you say? Are we going to the doctor, Tom?"

"We'll go to the doctor eventually. Let's not rush things."

"I can't hear you, Tom. Please speak louder. And tell the doctor to speak louder. I can't hear him."

"I'll give him a megaphone."

"Yes. Tell him to speak louder. Tom."

"Yes."

"Put your arms around me. My darling husband. I had the most terrible dream about us, darling. I dreamed you hated me and tried to kill me. Isn't that a terrible dream? Put your arms around me, Tom. I feel very weak and cold."

"It's about time."

"Please excuse me, darling. I'm afraid I'm going to sleep. Not very good company for you —"

"Good night, Evelyn. Evelyn? Evelyn? Can you hear me, Evelyn? — Well, sister, you asked for it. I thought maybe this time I could do it the easy way but you wanted to do it the hard way. So we're doing it the hard way."

The Frozen Grin

A Johnny Liddell Mystery
BY FRANK KANE



It was a routine killing, the kind of thing that might happen to anyone mixed up in the call-girl business. But it wasn't routine at all when Lisa came into the case.

THE girl sprawled across the bed, her bare arm crooked languidly over her head. Her thick, coppery hair was a tangle on the black silk of the pillow case.

Johnny Liddell scowled as he stood there beside her, looking down at her.

The black silk sheet had been pushed back, baring her to the waist. Her full, perfectly-molded breasts were firm, shapely.

Liddell growled deep in his chest, nodded to the white coated man from the Medical Examiner's office. He turned away as the black silk sheet blotted out the girl's face. Behind him, Larry Berlinger of the D. A.'s office, a tall man in a rumpled blue suit and grey fedora, stood watching him curiously. "Make her, Liddell?"

Liddell nodded. "Haven't seen her in years." He turned for a last look at the bulge under the sheet. "Used the name Lorraine Daly out on the Coast. Her sweetie tried to put the shake on a client of mine and

I wrapped him up for it. He drew a dime store."

The man in the blue suit pinched at his nostrils with thumb and forefinger. "When was that? Can you remember offhand?"

"About '48 or '49."

"He could have served three and gotten the rest off for good behavior," Berlinger said. "That means he's out now. What's his name?"

"Paul Lester. But there's no sense looking for him. He was killed in an attempted jail break a couple of years back." He looked around as two men carried in a long wicker basket, wrinkled his nose with distaste. "Can't we talk about it someplace else?"

The man in the blue suit nodded. "That's what I was just going to suggest. Let's go up to the D. A.'s office. He isn't as pretty as the redhead, but he's more likely to answer you when you talk to him."

Larry Berlinger led the way through a door that read *Wilson Deats* —

District Attorney. The room beyond had high, beamed ceilings that gave it a peculiar absence of sound, almost like a vacuum. The floor was covered with a thick grey-green carpeting, and the leather of the big armchairs had been polished to a soft patina. One side of the room was covered with a huge bookcase and in the center facing the door a large, highly polished desk dominated the room. A man was sitting behind the desk, his hands folded across his chest, fingertips touching.

"You and Mr. Deats know each other, Johnny," Berlinger said.

The district attorney nodded, waved Liddell in with a well-manicured hand. His thick, black hair was carefully shellacked into place, high cheek bones accentuated dark liquid eyes, and a thin pencil line mustache separated a full, sensuous mouth from a perfectly chiselled nose.

"Of course, Larry. Liddell and I are old friends." His voice was low, well-modulated. His smile consisted merely of a twisting upward of the corners of his mouth. The wary expression in his eyes was unchanged. "Come in and sit down, Liddell."

Liddell got comfortable in a leather overstuffed chair across the desk.

"Liddell made her, Mr. Deats," Berlinger told him. "She was mixed up in a shakedown case he worked on — on the Coast couple of years back. Used the name of Lorraine Daly then."

The d.a. twisted a heavy gold ring on his fourth finger. "Haven't heard

from her since?"

Liddell shook his head. "We weren't exactly intimate. I sent her boy away for a five to ten. Why?"

Deats opened his top drawer, fumbled in the depths, brought out an envelope. "You may have wondered why we asked you to have a look at the body?" He flipped the envelope across the desk. "This was found in her room."

Liddell picked up the envelope, studied it with a puzzled frown. It was addressed "Johnny Liddell, 56 W. 42 Street, New York, N. Y." In the lower left hand corner it was marked "Personal — Urgent." He lifted the flap, found the envelope empty, looked up at the district attorney.

Deats shrugged. "That's how we found it. Addressed and empty." He selected a cigarette from a humidor, fitted it to a holder, tilted it in the corner of his mouth. "We hoped you'd be able to tell us who she is."

Liddell turned the envelope over in his hands, dropped it back on the desk. "I've told you all I know about her." He scowled his bewilderment. "Why would she write to me?"

"The thought of suicide occurred to us. Did you check the medical examiner, Larry?" The man behind the desk turned to Berlinger.

"Not a chance, chief," the man in the blue suit shook his head. "No signs of any hesitation marks and the cut's too deep to be self inflicted on a first try."

Wilson Deats sighed delicately.

"There it is, Liddell. Obviously she had something she wanted you to know. The killer got to her first and removed whatever it was." He tapped the cigarette holder against his teeth. "If what was in that envelope was sufficiently important to commit one murder, the killer may feel he has to commit another. He may believe that you know the contents of that letter."

"But I don't. I didn't even think Lorraine Daly knew I was alive."

"I know that, and you know that," the district attorney cut in with a raised hand, "but does the killer? If he doesn't, he may feel he must kill you, too, to protect his secret." He broke off for a moment, seemed to be choosing his words carefully. "Since you have so much at stake in getting this killer before he strikes again, it occurs to me that perhaps you would consider working with us."

"What's the gimmick?" Liddell wanted to know. "Since when does the district attorney's office offer to work with a private eye? Me especially?"

Deats clamped the cigarette holder between his teeth, leaned back, re-folded his hands across his chest. "Frankly, Liddell, we feel you can be very helpful to us in this case. You see, from what little we know of this girl, it's quite obvious that given the opportunity the tabloids will drag a lot of well-known names through the mud. I'd like to avoid that if I can."

"What am I supposed to do? Confess to the murder so you can mark the case closed?"

The district attorney sighed. "Of course not. But there are some aspects of this case that I feel should be investigated confidentially—that is to say unofficially." He reached up, smoothed down the pencil line mustache with the tip of his index finger. "We feel that your connections in the café society set would be extremely helpful to us."

Liddell considered it, nodded. "Sounds reasonable."

"From what you've told us about the girl's background, it could be that she's been blackmailing somebody," Berlinger mused. "She might even be working with a gang and tried to doublecross them —"

"And then all you'd have to do is grab a hood and not have to try to prosecute some society guy, huh?" Liddell grinned bleakly. "It would be much neater all around, wouldn't it?"

"Berlinger didn't mean that," the D.A. said. "But along the same line, Liddell, since you're addicted to violence —"

Liddell cut him off. "I have to work the way I work best." He turned to Berlinger. "What've you got on her since she came East?"

The plainclothesman pulled a battered leather notebook from his hip pocket. "Not much." He wet his forefinger, flipped through the pages, found what he was looking for. "Lived at the Carlson House

since May." He rolled his eyes ceilingward, counted on mental fingers. "That's eight months." His eyes rolled back to the notebook. "No known source of income. Plenty of expensive clothes and trinkets, about \$2800 in a bank account." He flipped the notebook shut. "She was last seen at 5:30 this morning when a cabby dropped her off at her place. She was alone. The cleaning woman found her with her throat cut at 11:30." He returned the notebook to his hip pocket. "That's all we've got."

Liddell nodded, pulled himself out of his chair. "Okay, gentlemen. You've got yourselves a boy."

The district attorney managed a fair semblance of a smile, but the worried frown still ridged his forehead as he extended his hand. "Just be careful with that gun of yours," he said.

"I've got a license for it."

"Yes, but not a hunting license."

Johnny Liddell sat at the end of the oval bar at the Club Intime, stared around. A blonde at the far end of the bar looked interesting. Her shoulder-length hair was the color of a new penny, and her gown was sufficiently low cut to show she had plenty of plenty. Most interesting of all at the moment was the fact that she was alone.

Liddell waved the bartender down for a refill. "Who's the blonde?"

The bartender glanced down the bar with heavy-lidded, knowing

eyes. "A regular. Here every night." He filled the jigger to the top, capped the bottle, set it on the back bar.

"Alone?"

The bartender grinned. "That's the way she comes in. That ain't usually the way she goes out." He stared down the bar appraisingly. "I'm saving my pennies for a crack at that myself one of these days. Want to meet her?"

Liddell nodded. "Ask her if she'll have a drink with me." He watched while the bartender shuffled down to the end of the bar, leaned over, whispered to the blonde. She raised her eyes, looked down the bar to where Liddell sat, seemed satisfied with what she saw, and smiled. Liddell waited until a drink had been set before her, then taking his glass, he walked down to where she sat.

"Thanks for the drink." Her voice was husky in a way that raised goose pimples along his spine. "Won't you sit down?"

Liddell hooked a barstool with his toe, pulled it over. "You're not a New Yorker. Not with that corn belt twang."

The blonde shook her head. "Albion, Ohio." Her eyes were a deep blue, packed a terrific wallop when she turned on their full power. "Where are you from?"

"Brooklyn originally," he grinned. "53rd Street now." He sipped at his glass, looked around. "One of the reasons I duck this place is it gets so crowded and noisy."

"I didn't think I'd seen you around before. But the bartender seemed to know you. He said your name was —" she fumbled, looked helpless. "I'm afraid I forgot."

"Liddell. Johnny Liddell. What's yours?"

"Grier. Lisa Grier." She lifted her glass, took a deep sip, studied him over the rim. "Would you rather go someplace else?"

"My place?"

The blonde raised her eyebrows, pretended to look shocked, missed by a city block. "Say, you don't waste any time. Whatever gave you the idea you could meet me at a bar in one minute and the next ask me to your place?"

"I was a friend of Lorraine Richards."

The blonde stopped the glass halfway to her lips. Some of the color drained from her face. She put the glass back on the bar, looked around. "How good a friend?" she dropped her voice.

"I knew her when she was Lorraine Daly."

The blonde worried her full lower lip between her teeth. "Where's your place?"

"Marlborough Apartments on 53rd. Apartment 4E."

Lisa nodded nervously. "I'll come in about fifteen minutes. I don't want anyone to see me leaving here with you."

Liddell nodded, finished his drink, set the glass down. "I'll be waiting for you," he said. The girl managed

a sickly smile, watched him until he was through the door, then headed for a telephone booth.

The Marlborough Apartments was an old weatherbeaten, grime-darkened stone building nestled almost anonymously in a row of similar stone buildings on East 53rd Street. A small bronze plaque to the right of the entrance was the only clue to its identity.

The lobby was large, noisy, seemed to be bathed in a perpetual pink light, the reflection of a huge neon that hummed to itself and spelled out "The Kangaroo Room — Cocktails." A short, fat man stood at the cigar counter trying, with no apparent success, to interest the blonde that presided over it with his plans for the evening.

The immaculate little man who worked at the registration desk waved Liddell down as he headed for the bank of elevators. "A message for you, Mr. Liddell." He made a production of removing a telephone slip from the pigeonhole marked 4E, handed it across the desk with what he considered to be an urbane smile.

Liddell unfolded the slip, scowled at the message. It read: *Make it my place instead at 9. Hotel Martense, Room 625.* It was signed, *Lisa.*

"Not bad news, I hope," the man behind the desk said.

Liddell shook his head. "You take this message?" The desk clerk nodded. "Was it a woman?"

The man behind the desk dry-washed his hands nervously, bobbed his head like a cork in a stormy inlet. "She had a voice like a dream."

"Thanks." Liddell consulted his watch, found he had an hour to kill, headed for the elevators. At the fourth floor he got off, turned left to Apartment E. He inserted the key, pushed open the door, stepped through.

The arm that caught him around the neck in a mugger's grip almost cut his wind off entirely. He felt the point of a knife jabbed into his back just above the waist.

"Inside," the man said. The point of the knife prodded him into obedience. Once in, the door was kicked closed, leaving the room in almost total darkness. "Get your hands up on the back of your head where I can see them." The arm around his throat was loosened so that Liddell could suck a deep breath into his lungs.

He laced his fingers together on the back of his head, waited.

The other man reached over, relieved him of the gun in his shoulder holster. Liddell pivoted at the waist, catching the other man in the temple with his elbow. The other man cursed, dropped Liddell's .45, lashed out with the knife. Liddell side-stepped, felt the blade whiz past his cheek. He crouched back against the wall, waited for the next assault.

The only sound in the room was the heavy breathing of the two men. Liddell could feel the perspira-

tion running down the back of his shirt as he strained his eyes against the darkness.

He caught the dull glint of the knife blade. The other man was shuffling in, knife waist high, point up in the manner of the experienced knife-fighter. Liddell kept his eye on the knife hand, circled to the left slowly as the man closed in.

Suddenly, the man with the knife lunged. Liddell chopped down at the wrist with the side of his hand, heard the other man grunt, the knife clatter to the floor. He bent over to grab the knife, and the other man lashed out with his foot, caught the private detective in the side, knocked him back against the wall.

Before Liddell could scramble to his feet, there was a flurry of running footsteps, the crashing of a window pane. Liddell pulled himself up, snapped the light switch, located his .45 on the floor where it had fallen. He snapped off the light, limped to the window.

He stuck his head out the window. Two stories below the man huddled on the fire escape. There was the vicious spit of a .38 from below. The slug gouged a piece of concrete out of the wall next to Liddell's head, close enough to sting him with splinters. Then there was another shot, and the slug screamed wildly as it ricocheted off a metal step.

Liddell squeezed the trigger on the .45 twice. The man on the step below seemed to straighten up. His

body shuddered as the second slug hit him. He tried to raise the .38, but it had suddenly gotten too heavy. His knees folded under him; he toppled over the low guard rail, crashed headlong to the street below. His body hit the alleyway, lay motionless.

There was a muffled pounding on the door. Liddell walked back, threw it open. The hotel detective, a man named Maguire, stood uncertainly on the sill, gun in hand.

"What the hell's going on, Liddell?" he demanded.

Liddell flipped on the light switch. "Must've been a sneak thief."

The house dick stared at him wide eyed. "Good God, Liddell, you're bleeding."

Liddell grinned glumly, nodded toward the open window. "You ought to see the other guy."

Wilson Deats looked ruffled. His index finger worked from center to end on both sides of the pencil-line mustache, without effect. The carefully shellacked hair showed signs of having been raked constantly by nervous fingers.

"I thought it was understood there was to be no shooting, Liddell," he complained. "If I give out the story that you've been working with my office, do you realize what the newspapers will do to me?"

Liddell shrugged. "What was I supposed to do? Let him carve me?"

"After all, it was self defense,"

Larry Berlinger said, from the other end of the desk. "Why do we have to tie this office in at all? Liddell here came back to his room, a sneak thief tried to kill him when he caught him, and Liddell shot straighter. There're plenty of witnesses to that."

The district attorney nodded absently. He moved his lips as he tried the statement for size, approved. The familiar smile washed out the worried frown on his face. "Of course, Liddell caught a sneak thief, and—" The smile became strained, then drained off completely. "Eddie Blake a sneak thief?" He shook his head slowly. "The guy's a big time star, making all kinds of dough, and—"

"He hasn't got a dime," Berlinger argued. "He lives up every nickel he gets and he's always in hock to everybody in town."

Deats was unconvinced. "Not so broke that he'd try to steal from a private detective." He pursed his lips, leaned back, touched his finger tips across his chest. "What was he looking for, Liddell?"

"He didn't mention it," Liddell deadpanned. "But just as a guess, I'd say he was looking for something connected with that addressed envelope you found in Lorraine Richards' room."

"Where's the connection?"

Liddell shrugged. "Who knows? Lorraine lived well with no signs of support. Sounds like a shakedown racket, no?"

"She was tied up with a guy who went up for shaking down on the Coast," Berlinger reminded the D.A. "She probably came on East and went into business for herself. You think Blake killed Lorraine Richards, Johnny?"

Liddell shook his head. "Not necessarily. But my guess is that he knew who did." He pinched at his nose with thumb and forefinger. "He was in it someplace. In it deep enough to be willing to kill to keep the lid on."

"Lid on what?" Deats growled.

"One of these days you're going to pick up the newspapers, Mr. D.A., and find out that this café society mob has been organized into the sweetest vice ring you've ever stumbled into," Liddell told him. "They make the pros look like a bunch of amateurs. For a price they'll deliver anything from a dowager to a deb, and they've got enforcers that'll make the delivery stick."

Deats sat upright, stared at Liddell. "This a pipe dream?" He looked over to Berlinger. "Well, Larry? You're head of my confidential squad. How about it?"

Berlinger looked uncomfortable. "I've heard rumors about it, chief, but it's a pretty tight little circle. Knowing about it and proving anything are two different things." He squirmed unhappily in his chair. "Besides, there are some awfully big names involved."

The district attorney's face turned

an angry red. "All the more reason we've got to smash this thing — if it exists."

"It exists all right," Berlinger told him grimly. "But smashing it won't be a picnic. Too many big guys been bedding down with those broads."

Deats groaned, raked clenched fingers through his hair. "All the more reason. Don't you understand that as soon as the mobs know what's going on under their nose they'll move in and take over?" he said. He turned to Liddell. "You think that's what was in that letter Lorraine Richards addressed to you?"

Liddell shrugged. "It figures. She came on from the Coast, got in the ring up to her neck. But she was a pro enough to recognize the danger of the mobs moving in. When that started to happen, she wanted out and tried to plant enough evidence somewhere that she could hold over their heads." He made a suggestive motion with his finger from ear to ear. "They found out about it."

Deats jumped up from behind the desk, paced the office, hands clenched nervously behind his back. "We can't afford to waste a minute." He stopped in front of Liddell. "You willing to co-operate?"

Liddell nodded wordlessly.

"Good. This office will back you up a hundred percent in anything you do to clean it up. We'll put our own men on gathering evidence, but we'll need someone like you to dig on the inside."

The Hotel Martense was a pseudo modern pile of brick, concrete and plate glass that looked like a waffle standing on end. Each room had its own wall-sized plate glass picture window and a small balcony, made private by being indented into the grill of the waffle.

Johnny Liddell headed across the lobby to the bank of phones labelled *House Phones*, asked the operator to be connected with 625. The room answered on the fifth ring.

"What is it?" Lisa's voice was a combination of irritation and sleepiness.

"Liddell. Remember me?"

There was a brief pause at the other end. "What time is it anyway?" Then, an anguished yelp. "My God, it isn't even 10 o'clock yet. Who'd you say you were?"

"Johnny Liddell. We had a drink at the Club Intime last night."

"Where've you been? I waited half the night for you," she said. "You must have come by way of Nome."

"No. By way of the morgue."

"Anyone I know?"

"Ed Blake."

The gasp was clear over the wire. "Give me a few minutes to get decent and come up." The phone clicked onto its hook.

Lisa Grier opened the door herself. Her yellow hair was piled on top of her head, and her face looked as though it had been freshly scrubbed, revealing a small bridge of freckles across her nose. There was a

faint blueness under her eyes that complemented their deep blue color. She wore a housecoat of clinging material. She stood aside, watched him with worried eyes as he walked in.

As soon as she had shut the door, "Is Eddie really dead?"

Liddell nodded.

"How?" She made a reasonably good effort to swallow her balled fist. "I was only talking to him last night."

"He was in my room when I got back there last night. He pulled a knife on me —"

The color drained out of the blonde's face. "You killed him?"

"Was it supposed to be the other way around?"

"What do you mean?"

"You gave him my address, didn't you?" He caught her shoulder roughly. "The minute I left you at the bar you called him and told him where I'd be. You set me up for a kill."

The girl shook her head. "Why should I?"

"Because the minute I mentioned Lorraine's real name you thought I knew too much. Like Lorraine did."

"You're wrong, Johnny. I called Eddie Blake after you left me because I had to. I had to let him know I was busy. We have to keep in touch."

Liddell released his hold on the girl's shoulder, watched her glumly as she rubbed it. "Blake handles the girls' bookings?"

The blonde nodded. When she started to sway, Liddell caught her arm, led her into the sitting room, cleared space on the couch.

"Got any liquor?" he asked.

"In the kitchen cupboard."

When he returned a minute later with some ice, a bottle and two glasses, she was staring dry-eyed at the wall. He dropped two pieces of ice into each glass, drenched them down with rye. Then, he tapped the girl on the shoulder, handed her a glass. "Drink this. You'll feel better."

Lisa put the glass to her lips, took a deep swallow. She coughed, but some of the color came back to her face. "I'm acting like a jerk," she said, with an effort at a smile. "I always knew something like this would happen. I'm in a tough spot, eh?"

Liddell shrugged. "You're not exactly in clover."

The blonde turned the full power of her eyes on him. "Will you help me?"

"If you level with me."

"I will. I'll do anything you say." She slid closer until he could feel the roundness of her thigh against his. "I need somebody strong to hang onto." She put her hand on his knee, looked into his face. "I'm scared. I've been scared stiff ever since it happened to Lorry. You won't let — anything like that happen to me?"

"Nothing's going to happen to you." He waited until the girl had

taken another swallow from her glass. "How well did you know her?"

"We used to room together. I was working in the Bandbox as cigarette girl. Eddie Blake introduced me to her." She leaned her head back against the couch, gave no sign that she knew that the neckline of the gown had plunged breathtakingly. "She had just come on from the Coast. Her husband was dead. Did you know that?"

Liddell nodded. "He was killed in a jail break. Trying to break out of a jail cell I put him into." He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, lit two, passed one to the blonde. "Go on."

"We took a little flat on 49th Street. I used to pick up a couple of dollars modeling or doing bits on TV." She took a deep drag on the cigarette, let the smoke dribble from between half parted lips. "Lorry never worked but she always had money. One day she asked me to fill in on a double date with two of Eddie Blake's out of town friends." She shrugged. "I made more money that night than I did in a month of hustling butts. The next afternoon Eddie came to the apartment."

"Made you a proposition?"

The blonde nodded. "He told me he could keep me busy meeting the best people, going to the best places, wearing the best clothes. All he was asking was 10%." She made a weary gesture. "I figured why not? Two months later I had my own

place."

"Work out the way you expected?"

The blonde took the cigarette from between her lips, studied the carmied end with a mow of distaste. "Not exactly. I had visions of going out with big, handsome men to fancy places—" she shrugged. "What I should have realized is that big handsome men don't pay for their girls. They don't have to. The kind I got — old, fat, disgusting — were pretty hard to take."

"Why didn't you quit?"

"And go back to hustling butts?" She shook her head.

"How long have you been working for Blake?"

Lisa wrinkled her forehead. "Seems like years," she said, "but it's only been ten or eleven months."

"Keep in touch with Lorraine?"

"I saw her on and off at parties. Eddie booked a lot of parties." She emptied her glass, held it out for a refill. "He's got it so well organized he can deliver almost anyone you want. He's got a string as long as your arm. Too long."

"Why?"

"He hasn't been calling me lately. I've had to get my own dates. At the Club Intime and some of the other spots. It's harder that way."

"That's the racket, Lisa. It needs new faces all the time. It gets worse instead of better." He freshened his drink, leaned back. "Maybe that's what happened with Lorraine, too.

Maybe Eddie was passing her up on dates. Maybe Lorraine resented it and decided to get even."

"How?"

Liddell shrugged. "She was no amateur. She helped Blake get set up. Probably recruited most of his girls like she did you. A gal that much on the inside could be dangerous if she got ruffled."

Lisa shuddered. "You mean Eddie killed her? I can't believe that. He was just a little man with big ideas and good connections."

"He tried to kill me."

"But he didn't. You killed him." She leaned over, slid her arm around Liddell's neck. "That's why I don't want you to leave me. Nobody could harm me if you were watching over me." She raised her moist mouth to his, pressed against him, shuddered deliciously. After a moment, she drew away. "You will take care of me, won't you?"

Liddell grinned. "It'll be a pleasure, baby."

She wrinkled her nose at him, swung her feet up on the couch, laid back in his lap. She caught him by the tie, pulled his mouth down to hers. After a moment, her arms slid around his neck, her nails dug into his shoulder. Her lips moved against his.

The phone on the end table started to jangle. Liddell straightened up, glowered at it.

Lisa made a half hearted effort to pull the robe together over the broad expanse of flesh it revealed,

gave it up as a bad try. "You look good in lipstick. My lipstick." She touched her lips lightly to his, swung her legs off the couch, snagged the phone from its hook.

She held the phone to her ear for a moment, then dropped it back on the hook, stared at it with frightened eyes.

"Who was it?" Liddell wanted to know.

"A man. He says he's taking over Blake's operation and that I go with it. He said if I didn't fall in line I'd get what Lorry got."

"What's he want you to do?"

The blonde's lower lip trembled. "I'm to be at the bar at the Café Lawrence at 8 tonight. They're going to assign me to a territory." She raised stricken eyes to Liddell. "They don't own me. They can't do that."

"Café Lawrence, eh?" Liddell mused. "That means Mike Camden. The D.A. is right. The mobs have tumbled and are taking over. Baby, unless we smash this now they'll own you body and soul and they'll destroy both."

"Don't let them do it, Johnny. Make them let me out."

Liddell nodded. "You go to the Café Lawrence tonight. I'll be there."

The blonde pulled open the drawer of the end table, pulled out a toy-like .25. "This is my resignation. I'm handing it in tonight."

Liddell took the gun from her hand, tossed it into a chair. "Let me

handle it, baby. Those cap pistols sometimes burn. I'll take care of you."

"You won't leave me?"

Liddell shook his head. "Not a chance."

The blonde slid her arms around his neck. "But it isn't even noon and I'm not due until 8. Almost eight hours. Don't you think you'll be bored?"

Liddell grinned crookedly. "We'll think of something to do."

She pressed against him, found his mouth with hers. After a moment he started to pull back. She shook her head frantically, sank her teeth into his lower lip. When she finally drew back, her lips were moist, soft, her eyes glazed.

"I've been waiting for you a long time, baby," she told him huskily.

She slid out of his arms, shrugged her shoulders free of the gown. It slid down past her knees, and she stepped out of it. Her breasts were firm, full, pink tipped; her waist trim and narrow. Her legs were long, tapering pillars; her stomach flat and firm.

Her eyes dropped to her nakedness, rolled up to his face.

"I'll do my best to make sure you're not bored, Johnny."

She slid back into his arms, melted against him. As his lips found her half open mouth her nails dug spasmodically into his shoulders. She emitted little animal cries deep in her chest, quivered uncontrollably.

Liddell kissed her cheeks, her closed eyes, the lobes of her ears. "I've got a funny feeling I'm not going to be, baby."

The blonde chuckled. "I've got a funny feeling too, Johnny. And I like it!"

Johnny Liddell leaned on the bar at the Café Lawrence with the ease born of long experience. The dinner crowd was just beginning to filter in. Already a line was forming on the wrong side of the plush rope that extended across the entrance. Every so often there would be a whispered discussion between the headwaiter and a patron on the wrong side of the rope. Invariably it would be ended by a firm shake of the headwaiter's head.

A small four piece orchestra was playing softly, and the hum of conversation rolled outward toward the bar from the dining room. Inside the lights dimmed preliminary to the first floor show of the evening.

Liddell took a swallow out of his glass, glanced casually down the bar to where Lisa Grier sat tensely on the edge of her barstool. A muted buzzer sounded behind the bar. The bartender picked up a telephone from the backbar, muttered into it, nodded, replaced the receiver on the hook. Then, he walked down to where Lisa sat, leaned across the bar, whispered to her. She nodded, threw Liddell a worried look, started toward an unmarked door near the entrance.

Liddell waited until she had closed the door behind her, finished his drink, passed a bill to the bartender. When the man behind the bar shuffled off to ring it up, Liddell dropped his cigarette to the floor, ground it out, headed for the door the blonde had gone through.

A flight of steps led to a small balcony that overlooked the dance floor. A young man in a faultlessly tailored tuxedo was leaning on the decorative railing watching the floor show below.

"Lost your way?" he smiled pleasantly.

Liddell indicated the door marked *Office*.

"I want to see Mike Camden," he said.

The man in the tuxedo looked hurt. "Mr. Camden's too busy to see tourists right now." He caught Liddell's arm in a surprisingly strong grip. "You leave your table number with the headwaiter, and—"

Liddell brought his fist up from the side of his knee, and the man in the tuxedo fielded it with the pit of his stomach. The air wheezed out of him like a deflated balloon. His eyes glazed, a thin stream of saliva coursing down the side of his chin. As his knees started to sag, Liddell caught him under the arms, eased him to the floor. He looked around, saw no evidence that anyone had noticed.

He tried the knob of the huge glass door, found that it turned eas-

ily in his hand. Easing the .45 from its shoulder holster into his hand, he pushed the door open, walked in.

The room beyond was half den, half office. It was a big room with knotty pine panelling and Indian rugs. A comfortable fire hissed and puffed on the hearth of a huge fieldstone fireplace.

Mike Camden was sprawled comfortably in an armchair in front of the fire when he walked in. A white-faced Lisa Grier stood beside his chair.

"Come in, come in and join the party," Camden said. His voice was silky, smooth with an elusive trace of the Boston Back Bay, where he'd gotten his start. His sandy hair had receded from his brow to the crown of his head, exposing a freckled pate. He had a ready smile that plowed white furrows into the mahogany of his face. "Take the man's gun, Sammy."

Liddell felt the snout of the gun ram into his ribs, made no effort to resist as the man behind him reached around, relieved him of the .45. When Sammy came into view he was a counterpart of the man on the balcony. This edition was a shade shorter, but what he lacked in height he made up in breadth. As he stepped aside, he kept the muzzle of the snub nose .38 pointed at Liddell's midsection.

"You didn't sell me out, Lisa?" Liddell asked softly.

The blonde shook her head. "They saw you through the door."

Liddell turned around. From inside, he saw that the door was one-way transparent, although laced with a fine steel mesh. Anyone sitting inside the room could see clearly what went on on the balcony.

"That was a real professional job you did on Lewis, Liddell," Camden told him. "Lewis is supposed to be pretty good. Think so, Sammy?"

The tuxedoed guard growled deep in his chest. "He never could have done it if Lewis expected this joker to jump him."

"But he did it," Camden snapped. He turned his full attention to Liddell. "I can use some muscle like yours. Muscle with brains."

Liddell snorted. "For what? Bouncers? A Mickey Finn in a tuxedo like this character?"

Sammy growled, shuffled toward him.

"Hold it, Sammy," the night-club owner said. He selected a cigar from a humidor, smelled it, approved. "Okay, Liddell, I'm impressed with how tough you are. I'm offering you a spot in a new organization I'm setting up. It takes muscles and it takes brains. There's plenty in it for the right guy."

"That what Eddie Blake didn't have?"

A frosty smile tilted the corners of Camden's lips. "A jerk. By knocking him off last night, you just saved me the trouble at some future date. I've taken over his operation. I'm going to make it big time."

Liddell appeared unimpressed.

"Big time? A couple of amateur hustlers kicking back 10% is big time?"

"Maybe you don't have as much brains as I gave you credit for." Camden reached down on the floor at the side of his chair, brought up a sheaf of papers. "Here's a record of Blake's operation for the past year. The name of the girl, the name of the guy who hired her, and for how much. Mighty interesting reading, Liddell. Lot of big shots in that list." He dropped the papers in his lap, pulled a pocketknife from his vest, neatly sliced off the end of his cigar. "The take in dollars and cents was peanuts, but the possibilities are endless." He put the cigar in the center of his mouth, rolled it between thumb and forefinger. "That's why I'm taking over."

"Blackmail?"

Camden shrugged. "Let's say we go into the novelty business, selling these big shots home made movies and home made tape recordings. Some of those items go plenty high."

"You can count me out," Lisa Grier said. "I never let myself in for anything like that."

Camden turned to her, stared at her impersonally. His right hand whipped upward in an arc, caught her on the side of the face with a sharp crack, knocked her to her knees. "Nobody's asking you what you'll do and what you won't do. From now on you're part of the organization and you'll do what

you're told." He turned back to Liddell. "May take a little time to teach some of these chippies some discipline, but they'll learn. Now, how about you? You in?"

Liddell pinched his nostrils between thumb and forefinger. "How can you be so sure those records are worth the paper they're written on?"

"Blake thought they were. They were kept by one of his babes who was getting ready to yell copper because he was kicking her out." He took a deep puff on the cigar, spilled blue-grey ashes down his shirt front. "She thought they were, too. He had to get them — over her dead body."

"So Blake did kill Lorraine? I suppose you sent him there to do a job on me, too, last night?"

Camden sneered. "I never send a boy to do a man's job. This chip," he tossed a contemptuous nod in the direction of Lisa, "was supposed to have you out of the way at her place so Blake could go through your things."

"Why?"

"Just a precaution. The Richards dame used your name to threaten Blake. He wanted to find out if she'd passed anything over to you." He took the cigar from between his teeth, examined the thin grey collar of ash at its end. "We try to keep killing down when we start a new operation. Stirs up too much attention. But," he rolled his eyes up, peered at Liddell from under low-

ered lids, "on the other hand we don't take chances with guys who might know too much. You're either in, or —" he shrugged.

Liddell turned his head, looked at the man holding the gun on him, estimated his chances, decided they weren't very good. The hand that held the .38 was steady as a rock.

Mike Camden stared at him for a moment, grinned frostily. "Take all the time you want to make up your mind, as long as it's made up by the time I get back." He pulled his lanky frame out of the chair, nodded at Sammy. "If he tries to pull anything, burn him. I'll see how Lewis is." He walked across the room, pulled open the glass door, went out.

The man with the gun licked his lips. "You're a tough guy, Liddell. You mussed up the kid out there. He's my kid brother." His little eyes narrowed. "You heard what the boss man said. *If you try anything —*"

"You're not forgetting me, Sammy?" Lisa Grier broke in. She was leaning against the wall, her cheek stained an ugly red from Camden's blow. In her hand she held the ridiculously toy-like .25. "I came here to give in my resignation."

The gunman's eyes swivelled from Liddell to the blonde. He swung the gun, snapped a fast shot at her. It hit her shoulder, half swung her around. His second shot caught her squarely, slammed her back against the wall. She pressed her hand to her

breast, slid to her knees.

Liddell was on the gunman before he could swing the gun back on him. He deflected it with his left hand, put every ounce he had into a punch that landed under Sammy's right ear.

The gun fell from the guard's nerveless fingers. Liddell kicked it across the floor. He caught the guard's shoulder, swung him around, planted his left to the elbow in Sammy's midsection. Then, as the guard toppled over, Liddell brought up his knee, caught him in the face. There was a dull, crunching sound as the man's nose broke. Liddell chopped down at the exposed back of the other man's neck in a vicious rabbit punch. Sammy hit the floor face first, didn't move.

Swiftly, Liddell crossed the room to where Lisa sat. Her hand was against her breast in a futile effort to stem the blood that was already seeping between her fingers. Liddell tried to lift her to a chair. She shook her head, managed a smile. "Don't worry about me, Johnny. I told you I was coming here to give him my resignation."

She looked past him to the sheaf of papers on Camden's chair. She made a little grimace of pain, her fingers dug into his arm. "You've got to get rid of those papers, Johnny. They're dynamite."

Liddell looked at her, shook his head. "No, baby, they're evidence. The D. A. doesn't go in for blackmail. He'll give the hot-pants clients

a break, but he'll clean up the vice ring." He made her comfortable against the wall, walked over to the armchair. He picked up the sheaf of papers, rifled through them. He stopped, read a few names, whistled soundlessly. He folded the papers carefully, stuck them in his inside pocket.

"Johnny! Johnny!" Lisa called. "Look quick — the door."

Through the glass door, Liddell could see Camden straightening up from an examination of the guard. He looked down at him with contempt for a moment, tried to stir him with the toe of his shoe. Finally, he gave it up with disgust.

Liddell looked around for his gun, realized he couldn't get to it in time. He walked over to the door, waited until the night club owner's hand was extended toward the knob. Then Liddell yanked the door open suddenly, pulled Camden off balance.

Camden's eyes opened wider when he recognized the private detective. He tried to regain his balance, to go for his gun, but surprise had slowed his reflexes. Before he could get set, Liddell hit him in the stomach with a looping left, followed it with a right to the jaw. Dazed, the night club owner reeled backwards. Liddell was on top of him relentlessly, gave him no chance to get set. Another right to the jaw sent Camden reeling back further, staggering through the open door of the office. The low railing of the balcony

caught him in the small of the back, gave way with a screech.

Liddell had an impression of a grin frozen on the man's lips as he disappeared over the side.

From below came a long, sustained scream, the orchestra stopped in the middle of a bar. Liddell walked to the edge, looked down.

Mike Camden was spread-eagled across a table. Nearby, a woman in an evening gown seemed transfixed, her clenched fist in her mouth. Her escort pulled her by the arm, rushed her toward the exit. As Liddell watched, the hardier diners started toward the table, congregated morbidly around the body. Near the door, the headwaiter was struggling desperately to get through the crowd that was streaming toward the street.

Liddell turned, walked back into the office. The blonde had fallen away from the wall and was lying on her side, looking up at him with half-closed eyes, half-parted lips. He kneeled down beside her, slid an arm under her head, raised her gently to a sitting position. Her eyes were glazing over fast, the lids starting slowly to close. He bent down, pressed his lips to hers.

They didn't respond. They were already growing cold.

He put her down slowly, walked over to the telephone, took the receiver off its cradle. He dialled the number of the District Attorney's office, kept looking at Lisa while he waited for someone to answer.



Backfire



Pete Mavrey was kidding when he told Bernice how to fake her own murder and disappear. But then she did it, and he was up to his neck in cops and corpses.

IT WAS Saturday, and I was sitting in my Ford across the street from the First Californian Bank of Santa Cruz, waiting for Anna to get off work.

I could see her inside the bank, smiling at a customer; and, if you ask me, a smile from Anna gave you your money's worth, whether you ever drew any interest on your money or not.

I rolled up the window to shut off the cold fog that was blowing in from the ocean the way the local boosters say is unusual for June; and I opened the San Francisco paper I'd bought.

S.F. BEAUTY FEARED SLAIN

As a headline, it was nothing any

big city doesn't see three or four times a year. Then I glanced down at the picture to see if she was really a beauty or not, and it was like the bottom had dropped out of my stomach. I looked at that picture, and I read the story, and I just plain didn't believe it.

. . . car identified as property of Bernice Falknor, 25, found abandoned . . . lonely stretch of road near Walnut Creek . . . much blood . . . nearby, a bloodstained slip bearing the attractive brunette's initials . . . one shoe near road . . . signs of a struggle . . . body not found yet . . . police fear same killer who last year brutally murdered wealthy Oakland matron . . .

My God, Bernice had really done it.

Good grief, I'd thought it was just a game, the kind of game Bernice liked to play now and then: a suppose-you-had-a-million, or a suppose-you-married-a-movie-star kind of game. Only that night it had been suppose-you-wanted-to-disappear.

I read the newspaper story again.

My God!

We'd been eating spaghetti in the cafe over near Carmel, and talking about whether to go to a movie or wait a while and go to a night club, without either of us being much interested. At least I wasn't — I was trying to think up some way to tell her about being engaged to Anna; and, like all the other times I'd tried, I couldn't come up with anything that didn't sound noble or corny.

Bernice stopped right in the middle of a sentence, and said, "Suppose you wanted to disappear?"

"Why?"

"It doesn't matter why. Just suppose."

"The why part is important."

"How?"

"It makes the difference between cops chasing you or not. Cops can make disappearing plenty tough."

"Wouldn't they look for you anyway?"

"Sure, but they look differently for crooks."

Bernice thought about that, her head cocked on one side. Her hair was black, a shining coal black;

and her eyes were dark blue, but in this light they looked black too.

Sometimes, like a minute ago, you'd say she had a pleasant enough face, but she was no beauty like the papers claimed; then something like this suppose-you-wanted-to-disappear thing would catch her fancy, and it was like it had triggered a switch inside her — sort of started the electricity flowing.

She said, "All right, put it this way: you're fed up with your life and your friends, and you just want to disappear and start all over some place else. What would you do?"

"Sit on a box of dynamite, and light her up."

She laughed, and you wanted to hear more of it. "Silly — you want to disappear, not die."

The plan I came up with then was nothing I'd ever had in my head before. You understand, I just wanted something that would hold her fancy, and keep her interested and shining the way she was.

"Simply walking away and never coming back would be no good," I told her. "Your friends, your boss, lots of people would go to the police. And sooner or later they'd find you."

She nodded. "I can see that. How about putting a suicide note and your coat on a dark pier some night, and then walking away?"

"Better, but not good enough. Bodies float after a while. They'd be suspicious if they didn't find one."

"Also," she said, "this person might be wanting to get away from someone who would put private detectives on her trail unless he was certain she was dead."

"Oh, so it's a woman who wants to disappear?"

"Sure, let's make it a woman."

"Miss Bernice Falknor?"

She grinned. "Don't be a dope. Call her Miss X."

"She pretty?"

"A knockout."

"Fine. That makes it perfect for a good juicy sex slaying."

"Nothing doing. This woman doesn't want to die."

"She doesn't have to."

"What do you mean?"

I teased her with it. "Don't you see an angle?"

"Go on, smarty." Her eyes reflected light from the fire like a cat. "Tell it."

"Okay. Remember last year, that Oakland woman who was killed? They found the bloodstained car, but the body didn't turn up until just recently. With any luck — for the killer, I mean — the body never would have been found at all. The killer hasn't been found."

"I begin to get it." She rolled it around in her mind. "As you say, it has originality. Spell it out more plainly for me."

"Your Miss X would follow the same pattern — up to a point. Incidentally, she had better be well heeled; this trick will cost money. She'll need a second car to stake out

near where she's going to leave her bloodstained one. The bloodstained job will be a total loss except for her heirs."

"Miss X hasn't any heirs. Go on."

"Well, she abandons her car with a lot of her blood on the floor and upholstery, some hair torn from her head, maybe a fingernail or two broken off — all evidence of a struggle. And there should be evidence of a struggle outside on the ground too — maybe a shoe, and a blood-stained underthing or two. Say, aren't the tabloids going to love our Miss X?"

Bernice looked fascinated. "Sure, she could use chicken blood, and —"

"Whoa."

"What's the matter?"

"Chicken blood is no good. Cops would spot that in the lab. It would have to be human blood of her type. In fact, to be really safe, it would have to be her blood. Maybe a pint. But that would be a cinch for, say, an ex-nurse like you, who knows all about transfusions and hypos and stuff."

"Miss X isn't an ex-nurse," Bernice said quickly. Maybe too quickly.

"Then you could show her how to open a vein or something. Or maybe she'd just figure a way. She sounds like a smart apple."

"She is. Phi Beta Kappa," Bernice said solemnly, "and all that."

"Then she's a cinch. She'd get away with it. That brings us to section two of her problem."

"Section two?"

"Sure, the escape and the new identity. She'd go to this second car, and drive all night and all the next day, getting as far away as possible; only sometime before daybreak she'd have to bleach or dye her hair, cut it, comb it a different way. She'd have to put on different, sloppier clothes, wear horn rimmed glasses, put her lipstick on differently—she couldn't be pretty any more—and mind you, she couldn't stop at any hotel to do it. It would have to be done entirely in the car, and most of it in the dark."

"That's a large order," Bernice said thoughtfully, "but I think Miss X could manage it."

"I think so. She sounds like a real brain. Look how well she's done so far."

"What does she do next?"

"Settles down. Just plain settles down. She gets a job—not any kind of work she has ever done before. She's interested in different things, talks differently, walks differently, and, if she can, thinks differently. She does all that and carries a rabbit's foot, and she'd probably make it. Only I doubt if she'll even give it a try."

"Why not? She's a pretty determined gal."

"It's too expensive. You figure the car is only the beginning. She'd lose all her clothes, jewelry, keepsakes, even her bank account—she couldn't draw much out without

causing suspicion. She couldn't take a single thing with her, except what she'd be normally wearing when murdered."

"Poor Miss X." Bernice clucked her tongue. Then she grinned. "Pete, I think I'd like the night club. That sounds like it would be fun."

It was too.

And it was one more Saturday night I didn't tell her about Anna.

Somebody opening the car's door on the other side dragged me back from all this. It was Anna, of course.

"Hello, Pete." In the cheerful, bank-teller's voice I was always trying to kid her out of. "What's the matter?"

"Matter?"

"I could see you over here for ten minutes, just sitting here and scowling at that newspaper. What's the matter—find your name in the obituaries?"

"I guess I was thinking."

"About all your other girl friends?" she said, kidding.

"Sure, all forty-four of them." I started the car.

"What's in the paper?" She looked at it. "Another murder. From your face a moment ago, anybody would think you'd—" She broke off quickly, glancing at me to see if I'd noticed what she was about to say.

I wasn't sensitive about it. Not the word, nor the thought of it. I'd told her that a hundred times. It

was done and dead and paid for. It was like something that had happened to some other guy. She was the one who was sensitive about it. Her and Papa.

Papa.

"Listen," I said, "for once let's not spend Saturday evening with your folks."

"But you know how Papa counts on his Saturday nights."

"Just this once, Anna."

"It's their big night."

It was Papa's big night. I'll give it to Papa — he may have been a fat nuisance, but he worked hard. His boat was usually the first one out and the last one in. He made money and he didn't go out and fan it across the bars on Saturday night like so many of them did. His idea of a big Saturday night was to have you and the neighbors in, and load you up on Mama's cooking and that sour red wine he loved too well, and then talk your ear off about commercial fishing. Anna was saying:

"It's only one night."

"Look, we could drive up to San Francisco. I'll stake you to the Papagayo for dinner; and afterwards we'll go to a concert." The concert part was bait. To me, they're just a long pain in the ear, but Anna loves them.

She didn't even look tempted. She looked troubled. "I wish you and Papa got along better."

I didn't say anything.

"Just try to meet him half way."

"There's no such thing as meeting

him half way."

"Oh, Pete."

"Like last Saturday night."

"I talked to him about that. He didn't really mean to bring up — that subject."

That subject. "Look, I've told you before. You don't have to walk a circle around every word in the language that means murder or prison. Let him talk about it if he wants to. It's a relief from his talk-talk about fish."

She laughed, half embarrassed.

"How about San Francisco?" I said.

"Perhaps next week."

"Next week. Maybe next year, like the wedding."

"Please, Pete."

Please, Pete. I guess I was making it pretty tough for her — she loved the old rhinoceros — but it was tough for me too. Except for Papa, she and I would have been married a year ago, and the business with Bernice Falknor never would have happened.

We drove, not speaking for a while, then Anna said, "Please don't hate him. It's just that he loves me."

"I don't hate him."

And I didn't. To me, he was just another guy with a yard-long name I never did learn to spell. I never thought of it as being Anna's name, because it wasn't. Anna was tall and slenderly curved and golden-haired. Papa and Mama had adopted her as a baby, and she was the only child. And, if you ask me,

Papa was a lot more in love with her than he was with Mama.

I don't mean that the way it sounds. Papa was all right, I supposed, but the plain fact was he didn't want Anna to marry me or anybody else; and he'd go right on putting off the marriage as long as she'd let him. Which looked like a long time.

"Pete, we always seem to be arguing."

"I'm sorry."

She put her arm inside mine, and slid over closer to me, with her head on my shoulder for a moment. It wasn't anything electric, like Bernice. With Anna, it made you feel warm and solid inside, and you knew the way she made you feel and the way she felt wasn't something that could be turned off by either one of you. Sure, you wanted her as a woman; but with Anna, you wanted her as a wife too.

You wanted Anna and an evening on the town; and what you got was Papa and an earful of fish.

I stopped the car in front of her house, and Anna sat there with her head against my shoulder, then she sighed and moved away. She opened the door on her side.

"Aren't you coming in?"

"I guess not."

She sat there looking at me, her eyes brown and quietly troubled. "You'll be over tonight?"

"I don't know."

"What's the matter, Pete?"

"Nothing's the matter. Nothing

new."

"It isn't just Papa, and the Saturday nights, and the delay. I mean that isn't all of it. Is it, Pete?"

"That's a hell of a lot of it."

"What else?"

"Nothing you'd be interested in."

"I'm interested in you."

I didn't say anything, and I sort of looked past her, like I wasn't much interested in what we were talking about. One thing sure: I wasn't going to be at Papa's Saturday night. This crazy Bernice thing had knocked me for a loop; and if I had to sit through four hours of Papa and fish and red wine with garlic, I was going to blow a fuse.

I said, "You better count me out tonight."

I was being sulky. I was acting like a dope. I could tell by her face that she saw the soreness in me, and she thought it was for her. But she didn't get mad. Maybe that was the trouble — she never really got mad. If just once me and Papa and her were to get snorting, go-to-hell mad at the same time, a lot of things would get threshed out. But she didn't get mad.

"All right, Pete. Call me tomorrow."

"All right."

She waited for me to kiss her, but I was really riding my sulky streak now. I gave her a kind of second-cousin peck, and she waited for more, and didn't get it; and finally she sighed and got out of the car.

"Goodby."

"Bye."

I gunned the Ford away, and already I was sorry. It wasn't her fault. Like she said, all she wanted was for us to be happy. That was the trouble: she wanted too many people to be happy — her and me and Papa, all at once. The way it stood now, Papa was the only one that was getting any.

My place was a few miles up the canyon, where the big redwoods grow. It was just an oversized cabin, but I liked it under all those redwoods. It was isolated, it was cool, and at night, when the fog rolled up the canyon, the redwoods, way up there out of sight in it, would condense it into drops, so that all night long you'd hear it on your roof like rain. Maybe that last doesn't sound like anything special to you; but if you'd been stuck out in the middle of a desert for three years you never wanted to think about again, it would.

I parked my car by the gate, and checked the mailbox. There was one letter in it. A plain white envelope, postmarked San Francisco yesterday, with no return address. I opened it.

Dear Pete:

A few lines so you won't be worried. Miss X thought your idea was wonderful — it solved a problem she was beginning to believe insoluble. By the time you get this, she will be well on her way. Wish

her luck, darling.

Her new name is:

Jessica Martingale

P.S. She has no address yet, but she will let you know.

In a way, I was relieved. In the back of my head had been the wonder if maybe the thing was some nightmare coincidence — that somebody really had murdered Bernice in the way I'd dreamed up. After I got over being relieved, I got irritated.

Of all the goofy, hairbrained stunts.

Her and her insoluble problem. I knew what her problem was, and it was nothing that couldn't have been solved by calling the cops and having them warn a guy to let her alone. But she had to do it this way — murder, headlines, half the cops in the state working on it! It was crazy, like using a piledriver to crack a peanut.

And when the cops caught up with her — as they would — there was going to be hell to pay.

I read the two other San Francisco papers, and they told the same story, and I walked a couple of hundred laps up and down the front room, and finally decided to go fishing. I didn't like talk about commercial fishing, the way Papa always talked, but I did like to sit and drop a line now and then.

I had been fishing the day I met Bernice.

I had just caught one of those

fat silver perch, and killed and cleaned it; and I was casting out again. I made the cast, wound up the slack, sat in my camp chair, and got my pipe going; and when I looked up again, Bernice was standing there.

I guess the first thing I noticed about her was her yellow dress. The wind had it plastered to her almost as tight as her own skin, and the figure under that dress was something you'd take a second look at.

Then I looked up at her face, and saw the bruise under her left eye, and the little trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth. But I think even that didn't impress me as much as how mad she was. You remember, I was telling you about that kind of electricity she had sometimes? Well, she had it now. She had it so strong you could almost smell the ozone in the air.

She was breathing hard like she'd been running, and she was looking straight at me without saying a word. With her standing there and looking so straight at me, I had to speak:

"Hello."

"Hello." Her voice had that charge, like her face.

"Have a fall on the rocks?"

"What?"

"You've got blood on your chin."

She got a handkerchief from the pocket of the dress, and dabbed at her chin. She wasn't carrying a purse.

Then the man came down the path to the rock.

He had brown hair, about the color of mine, but he was older than me, almost as big, and when he got closer, I could see that while his face wasn't as mad as hers, still he was plenty steamed up. He was wearing three fresh claw marks on the side of his face, and they had dripped a few drops of blood onto an expensive tweed coat.

It looked to me like they'd battled the first round to a draw, then moved down to my rock to fight the second.

That's when my rod jerked strongly, and I yanked up to set the hook. I brought the fish in, and it was what I'd hoped it would be—a cabezone. Maybe six pounds, and my dinner for tonight.

"What is it?" She spoke like she was mad at it.

"Cabezone. Pretty thing, isn't it?"

"Yes."

They're not a bit pretty. They're green and dirty brown splotched, with a thick lumpy body, and a flat misshapen head, and a wide ugly mouth. I got this one on the cutting board, drove my knife through his spine, back of his head, and he died as quickly as that. I pulled out the knife, and blood welled up in the cut; and from the sound the woman made, she didn't much like the sight of it. Well, she didn't have to look.

When I looked up from trimming

off the fins, the man was almost as close as the woman, watching me work, and he had an interested, queer look on his face — and I mean queer. His eyes were pale gray, somewhat flat looking; and I've cleaned a lot of fish in my time, but this was the first time I ever looked up to see some guy getting an honest-to-God kick out of watching me cut.

I soused the cabezone in a tide pool, and dropped it into the flour sack. The man said:

"Come on, Bernice. Let's go."

The woman looked at me like she hadn't heard. "What did you say it was?"

"Cabezone."

"Good to eat?"

"The best."

"The flesh — it was green."

"It turns white when it's cooked."

"Oh."

The man said, "Come on, Bernice."

She watched me bait up with mussels.

"Bernice, you'll freeze here without a coat."

No answer. So far as she was concerned, he wasn't there.

I made my cast, reeled in the slack, sat down, and the woman pointed at my fleece-lined jacket beside the camp chair. I had taken it off when the fog cleared, but I was still wearing a heavy sweater. She said:

"Is it all right if I sit on that?"

"Sure." What else could I say?

The man said, "Bernice!"

She sat down on the jacket, still acting like he was invisible; and he watched her, his face all tightened up again. She was close enough to touch my chair now; and he said:

"Come on. We'll be late for dinner."

Dinner meant nothing to her.

I looked down at her, the wind molding the thin dress to her body, and trailing her black hair out; and she was starting to shiver.

But she was still mad.

I looked at the guy with his pale, queer eyes, and back at the woman with her plain intention to stick close to me; and it was none of my business who they were, or how she got her face marked up. None of my business at all. So, like a dope, I said:

"If you're cold, you can put that jacket on."

"Thank you." She put it on.

The guy looked at me like he wished he had a knife and I was a cabezone.

It was like that a solid half hour.

I caught a few pieces of trash, threw them back, baited up, cast, reeled in; and nobody said a word. Not a damned word. Every time I'd look up, the guy would be watching Bernice and me, his face mad and stubborn, like he was going to stay there all night if she did; and so far as I could tell, she hadn't looked at him once. Nor at me.

A half hour of that was plenty. By then the fog bank had come back

in to the edge of the breakers, and that fixed the fishing for today so far as I was concerned.

I took the hooks and sinker off my line, unseated and wiped the reel, and put the things away in my tackle box. I folded the camp chair, and now Bernice was watching me. I said:

"That's it for today."

The man said, "Give him his jacket."

She didn't. She said, "Are you going toward San Francisco?"

"Other way. Santa Cruz."

"Can I ride with you?"

What could I say? I said, "If you want to."

"Bernice, don't be a silly fool. I'll take you home."

She said to me, "Can I help you carry some of this stuff?"

"Take the chair."

"All right."

"Bernice, you listen to me—"
He had his fist doubled and his arm cocked, and Bernice was holding the chair like she was going to hit him with it; and since it was none of my fight, I stepped between them.

The fog was around us now like damp cotton, and I was so close to the guy I could smell the musky perfume he used, and see his small even teeth as he said:

"Butt out of this, mister. Butt out!"

He was blocking the path off the rock, and I was pretty tired of him anyway; so I guess there'd have been

some knuckles skinned if the guys over in the lighthouse hadn't chosen that second to uncork that bull horn of theirs. Up close that way, it's one hell of a horn, and it'll make you jump any time. But now, with everybody's nerves wound up, and us keyed up to tee off on each other, I swear it came out of that fog like the crack of doom. The guy nearly jumped out of his socks. Bernice started a scream, but her hand cut it off to a yip; and while the two of them were still vibrating, I took Bernice's arm, pushed the guy to one side, and walked away.

That's all there was to it.

When Bernice and I got in my car, a gray Chrysler was parked not far behind it; and when I drove away, it followed. Bernice said:

"Do you have a cigarette?"

I gave her one, she lit it from the dash lighter, inhaled like she'd needed a smoke for a long time, and I said:

"My name is Pete Mavrey."

"Bernice Falknor."

"Who's the guy following us, Bernice?"

"Eldon Shelwaite."

"What was the fight about?"

"I told him we were washed up." She inhaled again, blew out smoke, looked at me, and suddenly smiled. As quick as that, she'd stopped being mad. The excitement was still in her, making her face lively and pretty, and she said, "Next time I cut loose a boy friend, I'll do it closer to home."

"Where's home?"

"San Francisco."

"How are you going to get there?"

"You're going to loan me five dollars."

I looked at her, and she raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you?"

It turned out I was.

I also loaned her my almost new fleece-lined jacket that I paid fifty-five dollars for. Eldon Shelwaite followed us right into Santa Cruz, like he might pick up the fight as soon as I let her out, so I stopped at the north end of the City Hall where the police department was; and as soon as he saw the sign, he moved his Chrysler out of there in a hurry.

I stayed at the depot until her bus left, and he didn't show up again.

I didn't see her again for a month, and I'd already kissed the jacket and the five bucks goodby. Then I went home one Saturday afternoon and she was sitting in front of my place in a beat up old Plymouth, and her black eye was gone, and she was light and gay and apologetic; and she insisted she owed me a dinner for being so slow about returning the jacket; and that's all it took for me to call up Anna and tell her I didn't feel up to Papa's Saturday night this week, and for her to make some excuse for me.

It was fun that evening. Or maybe it was the relief from skipping Papa.

And afterwards I took Bernice

to the motel where she was staying, thanked her for the feed, said good night without trying to kiss her, and that was that.

And about a month later, she showed up again.

Only she was down in the dumps this time. I gathered Eldon Shelwaite was giving her a bad time. No, she didn't want to talk about it. She wanted to get away from him for a couple of days, and she wanted to be cheered up. I missed another one of Papa's Saturday nights.

I told Anna about getting the jacket and the money back, but I didn't tell her about the dinner. I didn't tell her about the second time either.

Nor the third.

Nor the tenth.

Now, I know what you're thinking, but you've got it wrong. Sure, she was pretty, she had this peculiar quality of aliveness at times that could get under your skin if you let it, but I didn't let it. Me, I had Anna. Besides, from the way Bernice acted at first, she wasn't making any play for me. She was using me for a safety valve. When her troubles got her down, she'd drop over to Santa Cruz for the week end, and we'd drive to Monterey or Carmel or San Mateo for dinner and a show or dance, or just for the ride and nothing else; and sometime during the evening she'd lose that glumness she usually arrived with, and the evening would turn into fun.

The way I saw it, we were good

for each other: I was having my troubles with Anna and Papa, and she was having hers with that screwball Shelwaite.

You understand, I never even tried to kiss her good night. But about the fifth — no, the sixth — time she showed up, everything changed.

She kissed me.

"That was just for good night, Pete." She looked at me a little anxiously.

"Sure."

"I like the way things are between us now. I wouldn't want to change a thing."

"Sure, I understand."

"Thank you, Pete." She smiled and patted my hand. "I need you. Just the way you have been. I need you a lot."

And I drove away, and I told myself it was just for good night; but I could still feel it.

I could feel it right down to the soles of my feet.

After that, I kissed her good night after every evening, and some other times besides; and after about the tenth week end, I stopped kidding myself I was just being polite, or that Bernice wanted things just the way they had been.

She was stuck on me; and it was pretty plain I could change a friendship into something a lot bigger any time I wanted to. She was a mixed up kid with plenty of troubles, and I was the first guy who ever treated her like she was anything

but wolf bait; and she'd fallen for me.

And she hadn't been kidding about that suppose-you-wanted-to-disappear question. Disappearance was her cockeyed answer to the Eldon Shelwaite problem. She figured I was a pretty smart guy; and when I made up that fantastic scheme to amuse her, she'd taken it for the real thing.

All that, because I hadn't told her about Anna at the beginning.

Well, there was nothing I could do about it now. I was wearing out my front room rug, and getting no place. The thing to do now was go fishing.

I went fishing.

All I caught was a stingray and a lot of kelp; and when I got back to my cabin, a gray Chrysler was parked in front of it.

I got out of my car and walked around it, and Eldon Shelwaite got out of his Chrysler. He had put on weight in the more than a year since I'd seen him, but at first glance he looked much the same. There was even the same sore look on his face. He got right to the point:

"Where were you last night?"

"What's that to you?"

"Were you with her?"

"With who?" I played it dumb.

"You know who, you sonova-bitch. Were you?"

"No."

"Where were you?"

I could see now he looked a

little sick. There were dark pouches under his eyes, and they were red like he might have been crying. Or maybe it was from the booze he was breathing in my face. He said:

"If you haven't got an alibi, I'm going to the police."

"With what?"

"With what I know about you and her."

"And what do you know?"

"I know plenty. I know all about her sneaking down here for weekend visits. You think I'm dumb? I know what was going on, and I've got detective reports to prove it."

I thought he was dumb, all right. And I knew how to shut him up in a hurry.

"And while you're telling the cops, tell them who was always hounding around after her, tell them who beat her up on at least one occasion I know of. They'll be interested in that." I poked a finger at the chest of his two hundred dollar gabardine. "You were the guy she was scared of, not me."

He looked kind of blank for a second, like he didn't know what I was talking about. "Where were you last night?"

I bent to get the key from under my mat, and when I stood up, I said, "Go to hell."

"*By God, if you killed her—*" He took a sock at me.

At least he thought it was a sock, but it was nothing but a sort of looping overhand that I blocked without half trying. I put the flat

of my hand against his chest, and shoved, and he went off my front porch walking backwards. He stumbled and would have fallen except that his Chrysler caught him. I said:

"I didn't kill her. Now get out of here before I call some cops and tell what I know."

A car had driven up while this went on, and now I looked at it. Anna was getting out of it, looking from me to the guy I'd pushed off my front porch. Eldon Shelwaite stood there a couple of seconds, a little white in the face, then he got into his Chrysler, and slammed it out of there. Anna came over.

"What was that all about?"

"Just a drunk. Looking for a fight."

"Who is he?"

"Some guy who wandered down this road by mistake." I couldn't bring myself to tell her who he was; although, if he actually did go to the cops, she was going to find out soon enough. She was going to find out a lot of things, and every one of them was going to sound like something different from what it was. What a mess.

"Pete."

"Yes?"

"I didn't mean to quarrel with you this afternoon."

"You didn't quarrel with me. I just behaved like a cluck, that's all."

"If you still want to go to San Francisco, I'd like to."

I looked at her. And I thought about here she was making up to

me like it was her who'd been wrong; and I said:

"What's Mama having tonight?"
"Chicken cacciatore."

"I think I don't want to miss that."

"You don't have to come just because —"

"Now, cut it out." I put an arm around her. "Your old man is all right, and so am I. We don't happen to think so right now, but if we keep working at it, we'll sooner or later have to admit it's a fact."

"Pete, that's a nice thing to say."

She had her face against my chest, and I could smell the clean dry flavor of her hair. It was a nice thing to say. It was fine. For a minute I almost believed it myself.

The next day, Sunday, a 55-year-old ex-seaman gave himself up to the San Francisco cops, and confessed the slaying of Bernice Falknor. Besides being an ex-seaman, he turned out to be an ex-inmate of the state hospital for the insane. What the papers called "a harmless crank." They turned him loose.

The police kept working.

Monday, a woman's body was fished out of the bay. Acquaintances of Bernice Falknor viewed the body, and stated unanimously that it wasn't Bernice.

Tuesday, the police reported no progress. At least half a dozen leads had petered out. And Tuesday I got a letter in a plain envelope, postmarked Sacramento.

Dear Pete:

I have an address now — 1423 Eltange Street, Sacramento. Apartment C.

I'm scared. I had no idea it would be like this. Can I talk to you? Could you get over here? Please, Pete?

Jessica Martingale

So she was scared, she'd had no idea it would be like this — good grief, what'd she thought it was going to be like? The answer was simple. She hadn't thought at all.

It was after six o'clock, I hadn't had dinner yet, I was pooped from a tough day at the shop; but I got in my car and drove a hundred and fifty miles to Sacramento.

1423 Eltange Street was a row of one-story apartments running back to the alley. Apartment C was dark, but radio music came out of it, so I punched the bell.

A barely visible shape showed up behind the screen door.

"Who is it?" Bernice's voice.

"Pete."

Then the screen door opened, and she came into my arms so hard I had to take a step back. She was kissing me, her body hot and taut against me, and I — well, I won't lie about it — I was kissing her back. When she was like that, you kissed her back whether you wanted to or not. Then I said:

"Come on. Let's get out of here."

"Where?"

"My car. We can't talk here."

"Wait until I get my shoes."

She'd done a better job of changing her looks than you'd have expected. Her hair was a sort of medium brown now, as short as it could be and still look like anything, and sort of carelessly put together. Her lipstick, even to me, was the wrong color for her, there was too little of it, and it was on crooked. She couldn't hide the fact she was young and healthy; but the sleeveless green dress just sort of hung on her, and when you added the sag-shouldered way she stood to make herself look flat chested, and the perspiration on her face, and the gum she was chewing, she just missed being a bag.

In the car, she said, "How do you like it?"

"Like what?"

"The new identity."

"It's better than I thought you'd do."

She may have been scared when she wrote the note, but she wasn't now. She was wound up, she was excited, but she wasn't scared.

"Pete, I'm in trouble, aren't I?"

"You sure are."

"Could they put me — in jail?"

"They probably could."

"Why? I didn't do anything —"

"You perpetrated a hoax that has already cost the taxpayers a pile of money. You've got cops chasing their tails all over the place. You've got the newspapers spreading it from coast to coast. A lot of people are going to be plenty sore when the cops catch up with you. They'll

figure some way to take it out of your hide."

"But what could they charge me with?"

"Don't ask me, I'm no lawyer. All I know is they'll find something; and, flimsy or not, the judge'll figure you need a lesson, and he'll sock you the limit."

"Pete, I don't want to go to jail."

I didn't say anything. I know about jail, and I didn't want her to go either. But that didn't mean she wouldn't.

We were passing one of those little parks that are scattered over Sacramento, and I pulled the car to the curb. "Let's sit on the grass."

"That would be nice."

It was late, but there were still a few people in the park, so we wouldn't attract any attention. Besides it was pretty dark in there. We sat on the grass under a tree and it was cooler, and after a while, she said:

"How do you like my new name? Jessica Martingale."

"Phoney as a wax apple."

She laughed at that. "You're in a bad humor, aren't you, Pete?"

"Yes."

"Because I'm going to jail?"

"Because you ever started this crazy thing."

"It was exciting, Pete. Once I got started, everything went off like clockwork. I don't see where I made a single slip. And you said yourself that my new identity was a good

one."

"And your friend Shelwaite visited me the other day."

That took some of the liveliness out of her. "What did he want?"

"He knew all about your trips to Santa Cruz. He had private detectives on your trail. He thinks I killed you and he says he's going to the cops with it."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes. And if you think that won't hit the headlines, you're crazy. And my prison record isn't going to help the least little bit."

She thought about that a while, and said in a sudden, fierce voice. "Damn him! *Oh, damn him!*"

I didn't say anything, and it was maybe a half a minute before she spoke again: "And that will hurt your chances with your other — girl, won't it?"

"Who told you about her?"

"Nobody. I just knew. What is she like, Pete?"

"I'm going to marry her."

For a moment she didn't speak, then she said, "Oh," and her voice had gone dull, all the excitement out of it. "Do you — want me to give myself up to the police?"

I thought about jail, and especially about how it would be for her, and I said:

"It's not for me to say."

"If you tell me to, I will."

"I'm not telling you anything."

"But you want me to, don't you?"

I didn't say anything.

"Then tell me to."

"No."

I could feel her looking at me in the darkness, and finally she said, "Then I won't go back."

That was that. I stood up.

Bernice stood up too. "I'm sorry, Pete."

I didn't say anything.

"They can't do anything to you until they find a body, can they?"

"No." Just smear my name from here to Hoboken.

"Then nothing really bad can happen to you. And if she — this girl — won't forgive you, she doesn't love you very much, does she?"

"Come on, I'll take you home."

Neither of us said anything until I stopped the car under some trees half a block from her apartment.

"You better walk it from here."

"All right." She didn't get out. "Aren't you going to kiss me good-by?"

"There'll be no more of that."

She laughed — why, I don't know — something suddenly seemed to please her. "I told a fib back there in the park."

"So?"

"I'm not really sorry. About it hurting you with your other girl. If she breaks it up with you, you're free again, aren't you?"

"That's hardly the word for it."

"It's my word for it." She sat a moment, then said, "I'm not going to stay in Sacramento. It's too hot. I'm going to move to the coast."

"If you're smart, you'll make it

the east coast."

"No, that's too far. Santa Barbara perhaps. I was there once and it was pretty. I'll let you know."

"I don't want to know."

"Maybe you will later." She took my hand, held it a moment against her cheek before I pulled it away. "I'll let you know."

I watched her walk away in that round-shouldered shuffle I suppose she'd been practicing; and, whether I wanted it to or not, my hand remembered the warm, alive feel of her cheek.

Wednesday, when I got home for work, there was a black Chevvie sedan parked in front of my place with a couple of men sitting in it. I got out, and they got out, and before anybody said a word, I knew who they were. I knew cops. I knew them better than I wanted.

These were the new style cops, the ones with manners.

"Pete Mavrey?"

"That's right."

"My name is Wykehorn. This is my partner, Klenahan. Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office." They showed me the identification, then:

"Do you know a Bernice Falknor?"

"Yes."

"When did you last see her?"

"About three weeks ago." That was the first lie. I had officially gone out on a limb for her now.

"Suppose you tell us about it."

"Sure, come on in the house."

We went in and sat down and lit up, and I told them what I knew about Bernice Falknor from the afternoon down by the Pigeon Point Lighthouse right up to three weeks ago, and you can bet I didn't spare Eldon Shelwaite in the telling. I stopped talking the sentence before Bernice asked me, "Suppose you wanted to disappear."

Wykehorn was a tall, lean guy with iron-gray hair and a big anvil of a jaw; and Klenahan was red-headed, freckled, and young enough to be his son. Wykehorn did the talking. I was playing it friendly, and they were playing it polite, but nobody was fooled. I wasn't sweating just because it was a hot day, and they hadn't made the long drive down from Martinez just for their health. The way they saw it, a woman had been killed, and I could be the guy who had killed her.

"So you haven't seen her for three weeks?"

"That's right."

"You knew she was missing?"

"I saw it in the papers."

"Why didn't you tell the authorities what you knew about her and this Eldon Shelwaite?"

"I was thinking about doing that. At first I figured you'd probably turn him up without any help from me. I didn't want to get mixed up in the thing unless I had to."

"Because of your record?"

So they had that too. I guess I hadn't expected anything else. I said, "Yes."

"We understand you served time for killing a man. Want to tell us about it?"

They knew all about that already. What they wanted was to make me tell it. They were ready to put the pressure on now, and this was the first turn of the screw.

"It happened about six years ago on New Year's Eve in a desert town —"

"What town?"

As if they didn't know. "Kingis-
tan, Arizona."

"Go on."

"I only stopped there overnight on the way to the coast, and, it being New Year's and all, I made a few bars —"

"You were drunk?"

"Yes, I was."

"Go on."

"I didn't even know the guy, he was just another drunk. Only he was fighting drunk. I happened to jiggle his arm when he was taking a drink, and he spilled some of his shot, and for that he cussed me out. Then he socked me on the mouth, and it hurt, and I socked him back."

"Socked him where?"

"On the jaw." I was sweating hard, just thinking about it.

"What happened then?"

"I guess I knocked him out. But if he'd fallen against a table, or if somebody had caught him, it would have been just another one of those two-punch saloon arguments. But nobody caught this guy but the corner of a brick wall. And he was

dead before the doctor got there."

"That sounds like an accident."

"Hell, it was an accident. I never saw the guy before in my life. I had no cause to want to kill him."

"What happened next?"

"It turned out the guy was a big wheel locally. Lots of family, lots of money. All the witnesses were more than half drunk, and I was a stranger in town; and by the time a few high-powered lawyers got through telling those fuzzy witnesses what they saw, it was no accident. His family tried to make it first degree murder. They couldn't make that stick, and without all that money, they couldn't have made anything stick; but what little they did make stick netted me two years at Florence, and a year in Phoenix on parole."

"A pretty expensive punch."

"You're telling me."

"Where do you work, Mr. Mavrey?"

"Jordoe Tool Company. In San Jose."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a tool and die maker."

"That's a good line."

"I like it."

"Now, there are a couple of points in your story about Bernice Falknor we'd like you to clear up."

It wasn't just a couple of points, it was the whole story. Twice. Three times, picking it apart, cross checking; it was every minute of my time for the past week. It was about Anna and who were my friends. Then it was the story again. It was

all just plain hell.

"Do you mind if Klenahan and I look around your house a little?"

"No, I don't mind."

If you've never seen a couple of professionals "look around" a house, you've got something coming to you. They did everything but pry the shingles off the roof. They found a steel rule I'd lost a year ago, six bits in money, and a mouse's nest with three mice in it in the attic. They asked a question for everything they looked at; and about a quarter of nine Wykehorn asked:

"Did Bernice Falnor talk much about Eldon Shelwaite?"

"Was it him sicced you onto me?"

"No. The tip was anonymous."

"I see. No, she didn't talk much about him. He was in the real estate game, she said. Promoting big tracts of housing. He didn't put up the money, he just promoted the deals — lined up the guys with the money, the guys with the land, and the guys to contract the houses. He handled a lot of money; and, according to Bernice, he got his share and then some."

About fifteen minutes more of questions, then Wykehorn said, "I guess that's all." He stuck out his hand. "Thanks Mr. Mavrey, you've been very cooperative."

Cops, new style. I shook his hand. "Glad to help."

"Sorry to put you to so much trouble."

"It's your job. Look, I don't suppose all this can be kept out of

the papers?"

He gave me a you-know-how-it-is smile, and shook his head.

"I didn't think so."

For a second, watching them go out my front door, I felt almost good. By God, I'd sold them. They were going to give Eldon Shelwaite a rough time, but I didn't care about him. The way I figured, a rough time was what that guy rated. Then I thought about the newspapers and about Anna, and I didn't feel good any more.

I took a shower, put on fresh clothes, and drove down to Anna's place. The black Chevvie sedan was parked in front of her place now. I drove past without stopping.

Cops. They check everything. I went home.

Either Anna would call me or she wouldn't.

She didn't.

* * *

The papers had it by noon the next day. And they had it wrong. They had it — in that roundabout way they use to dodge the libel suits — that Bernice had been living with Eldon Shelwaite right along for the last year and a half. They mentioned me, because the tip had been about me and they rated me a sort of second string boy friend, but the real news was Shelwaite. He'd been picked up for questioning last night, and he was still being held. He'd probably acted screwy enough to make them suspicious.

Bernice was getting her revenge on him.

There was no telling where the thing would end. As Bernice had said, the police couldn't actually arrest anybody until they had either a body or a confession; but they could sure make a lot of trouble for everybody concerned, including me.

I could turn her in, and the pressure would be off, but I still wouldn't be square with Anna. And I couldn't be too sure I'd be square with the cops either. I'd lied plenty to them. But mostly I guess I couldn't turn her in, because she'd go to jail. If the cops found her and sent her there, that was one thing; but me sending her there was something else. I couldn't do it.

Just before quitting time, the word was passed back in the shop that somebody out front wanted to see me as soon as I was off work. Then the whistle blew, I went up front, and a man was waiting there for me.

He was a sort of medium guy in his forties, wearing a suit that could have been pressed better, but was a long way from being crummy. His face was ordinary, nothing you'd notice in a crowd; and his voice, like the cops yesterday, was polite. That's what I figured him for — a cop or a reporter.

"Pete Mavrey?"

"That's right."

"Maybe we could talk better outside in the car. Oh, my name is Otto Greck."

"Police?"

"No."

"Reporter?"

"No." He was leading the way outside.

Outside was a gray Cadillac convertible with the top up, and sitting in it a woman with red hair. Closer, you could see red wasn't the real color of her hair — that shade of red wouldn't be the color of any woman's hair — but that didn't mean it wasn't all right. Her face was all right too, until you got right up to it, and saw how carefully it was made up, and how it changed so little when she talked that you wondered if it was a mask or something. Otto Greck introduced her:

"Mrs. Eldon Shelwaite."

"Hello." So he had a wife.

"How do you do?" Her voice was a little scratchy, not a very pleasant voice, but maybe she wasn't trying to make it pleasant. "Get in. I want to talk to you."

"About what?"

"Get in."

Greck opened the door, and we got in, him between Mrs. Shelwaite and me in the front seat. He said:

"Mrs. Shelwaite is divorcing her husband."

Just what I needed — to get mixed up in a divorce suit. I reached for the door handle.

"Wait a second."

I waited, but mostly because he had a good grip on my arm.

"How much a month do you make in that tool works?"

"Let go my arm, chum."

"How would you like to make a month's salary at one crack?"

"Doing what?"

"Telling us some of the things Bernice Falknor said about Eldon Shelwaite."

"Such as?"

"Where he kept his money."

"How would she know that?"

"She was living with him. And before that she worked for him."

"The living with him part was just in the newspapers."

"Stop kidding," Mrs. Shelwaite said in her scratchy voice. "We know she was living with him."

"How?"

Otto Greck smiled a little, and I knew then what it was about him I didn't like. With that smile, he looked like half the pimps in the world. He said:

"The same way we know she was playing around with you."

I just looked at him, and he said: "I'm the detective he hired to track her to you."

"What are you doing working against him now?"

Greck shrugged. "The Falknor dame was knocked off. I was out of a job. Then I thought Mrs. Shelwaite might be interested in what Shelwaite had been getting away with."

"So you made up a story about him and Bernice, and sold it to her."

Mrs. Shelwaite looked suddenly and sharply at the detective; and he wiped the smile off his face, and

said:

"I made up nothing. That Falknor dame had him wrapped around her little finger. She treated him the only way you can to impress a guy like that — like he was dirt, like she didn't give a whoop if she never saw him again. She drove him crazy. They'd have a fight and she'd walk out on him just like that; and when he couldn't stand it any more, he'd have me hunt her up, and it'd cost him plenty to get her back. He was keeping her in that extra apartment up on Telegraph Hill that nobody knew anything about. She wasn't the first he'd kept there, but after she arrived, brother, that was the end of the others. She had him taped, tied, and hypnotized." He gave me the soft pimp's smile. "Just like she had you, chum."

He wasn't batting a hundred percent — not the part about me, anyway — but the rest of it had the ring of truth. So the papers had had it right after all. It took the wind out of me a little.

Mrs. Shelwaite's mask cracked a spasm of anger, and straightened again. The scratchy voice said:

"He was putting money away. I know that. I wasn't in his confidence any more, but I know the way he works. Always the same. On a big job like this where four or five millions are involved, he'd have at least a hundred thousand chiselled off and socked away."

"You see," Otto Greck said, "we want to find that money so it'll be

available for alimony."

I looked at them, that sweet smelling pair — the hard faced dame and the soft-smiling detective — and I'd had enough. I opened the door, and I got out, and this time Greck was pulled half out of the car with me before he let go. Walking away, I heard Mrs. Shelwaite's scratchy voice:

"I told you it wouldn't work."

* * *

I thought about Bernice Falknor and Eldon Shelwaite, and it was hard to say how I felt. Sort of betrayed, I guess, if that means anything to you.

I wasn't judging her. God knows I'm no saint; it wasn't my business to judge anybody. Besides, it happens all the time. You say they do it for the money, but there's more to it than that. Bernice had told me a little of her early life; and it, too, was something that happens all the time — kids growing up with their parents not giving a damn about them, and the rest of the world sure not caring if they even eat or not. A lot of mixed up people come out of that background. Security is what they're looking for. And love. But they keep getting it confused with money.

And I thought now that I understood what had been behind Bernice's elaborate, incredible scheme to disappear. Like the detective had said, she'd tried to walk out on Shelwaite before, but always his money brought her back. If she were

dead, Shelwaite would stop looking for her. And this way, if she were to weaken and want to come back to the money of her own accord, there was the prospect of jail to stop her.

The way she saw it, she had straightened out her life. But she'd sure messed up a lot of other lives. Shelwaite's. Mine. Anna's. Anna . . . don't think about her. Put her out of your mind.

As if I could.

* * *

I stopped in Felton and bought a big steak on the theory I'd cook a big dinner to buck myself up. Then I drove up the canyon to my cabin, deep in shade, even at six o'clock. I wasn't at all prepared for the car that was parked there.

Anna's.

She didn't come to meet me. She stood there on the porch while I got out of the car, opened the gate, came up the walk, climbed the two steps, and stopped a couple of feet from her.

There was an odd look on her face — not really odd, but one I'd never seen there before — as if she were seeing me in a suddenly different light. At least that's the thing that occurred to me at the time. We stood like that a few seconds, and she didn't say anything, just looked at me that way; and I knew it was time for me to start talking.

I told it in one long rush, not sparing myself, not telling it a fraction different from the way it

happened, nor trying to hide anything she might see in my face; and I ended it exactly where I had with the cops — just before the suppose-you-wanted-to-disappear line. I wasn't holding that back to spare myself; it was because if I told her that part and she didn't tell the police, she'd be a party to the hoax too. And I didn't want that.

I finished and stood there, still not knowing what was going to happen to me. She said:

"You didn't have to tell me, Pete."

"It happened just the way I said."

"Yes. I've been wrong. For a long time."

"I'm the joker that's been wrong."

"No. I've been trying so hard to make it easier for Papa, that I . . . I forgot I might lose you. Let's get married, Pete. Soon."

Maybe you'd say things got mushy after that; but it was the kind of mush you carry around in your memory the rest of your life, and smile in your sleep when you dream about it.

But we finally got down to plans.

I was going to take a day off tomorrow, even if she couldn't, because she would have to start breaking in a new teller for the bank; but she'd take long enough for us to go over and take out a license. After that we'd get married as soon as she had her clothes ready, and the new teller was solid — ten days

with luck, two weeks at the outside. We'd do it big — church and reception and all — because Papa and Mama would want it that way.

That's as far as we got. I was all for making a big night out of tonight, but she said she had a lot of things to do, now that it was all settled, besides:

"Papa is being difficult." Her smile was shy. "You see, I told him this afternoon about us being married right away."

You think that didn't make me feel good? She'd taken all that guff from the cops last night, and all the slop the newspapers had dished out today, and she was still my girl, still wanted to marry me even before she heard my side of it.

I stood there with my arms around her, my throat so full I couldn't have said anything if I tried. It was like being in church.

* * *

After she was gone, I cleaned up, and I cooked the steak, even if I was too excited to eat much of it. And in the middle of dinner I got a phone call. A woman's voice:

"Pete?"

"Yes."

"It's Jessica."

Bernice. She was disguising her voice a little, which was why I hadn't recognized it at the first word. I didn't think the cops would have tapped my wire, but it still hadn't been smart for her to call me. She was saying:

"I want to see you, Pete."

"I can't come all the way to —"

"I'm in Capitola."

Good grief, Capitola was only a few miles down the coast from Santa Cruz. "Are you crazy?"

"I'm at the Seavrene Motel, just off the beach. You can't miss it. My room is number six."

"Listen, Jessica, I'm going to be married."

That stopped her. Finally she let out a little sigh. "That sort of puts an end to things, doesn't it?"

"Yes. It's goodby, kid. And good luck."

More silence. Then: "Good luck to you, Pete. And her."

I didn't sleep very well that night, but at least I didn't dream about prison. I dreamed about Papa, which was almost as bad.

Next morning we applied for the marriage license before Anna went to work. She looked so fussed and pretty I wanted to take her in my arms right there. Later, as she was getting out in front of the bank, she said that Papa wasn't feeling too well. He was taking things very hard. Much harder than she'd feared. We agreed it might be a good idea if I stayed away from the house that night.

Which left me with a whole day to myself. By evening, I was so restless, so tied up inside, that I had to do something, anything, just to get away from town for a while — away from myself.

So I went for a drive.

When I finally snapped out of it, I was way up the Salinas Valley, almost to Paso Robles. I'd driven nearly a hundred and fifty miles, and it was after midnight, but I felt fine.

It was going on four o'clock when I headed up the canyon to my place.

The lights were on. I hadn't left them on, but they were on now. And Eldon Shelwaite's gray Chrysler was in my driveway.

I parked and crossed to the door and opened it, and for a second I didn't see anybody in the room. Then I looked at the floor, and it was like my heart stopped beating.

Eldon Shelwaite.

With a hole in his face where the bridge of his nose ought to be. And the rest of his face black-freckled and smoked from powder burns. There was a lot of blood soaked into the carpet. It looked black. I could smell it.

The room looked like it had been searched — not a neat, cop search like day before yesterday — a messy search. Cushions pulled out of chairs, magazines yanked off shelves, books on the floor, radio turned half around. Who? Looking for what?

I walked through the rest of the house, and all of it had been searched — drawers open, mattress half on the floor, stuff scattered all over the place, one hell of a mess. But why?

I looked good, but there was no gun anywhere in the place.

Call the cops.

I looked at the phone, but I couldn't make myself touch it. I went into the living room. I sat in a chair and lit a cigarette, and this time my hand was steady. Oh, I was still sick and still scared, but by now it had settled like a cold lump of lead in my belly.

Brother, you're jammed. You're jammed bad.

He's dead, and in your house, and you've got no alibi at all. Maybe the killer left clues, and maybe he didn't. Maybe the cops will find them, and maybe they won't. One thing sure — you're going to jail. You've got no alibi, no explanation, no nothing. Just a record. Six years ago you killed a man; and now no cop, no judge, no jury, nor anybody else is going to believe you didn't kill another one here tonight.

My portable typewriter had been taken out of the closet and opened up. There was a crumpled ball of paper in the corner; I picked it up, smoothed it out, and there was typing on it:

Eldie, chum, you may as well forget about the money

That was all. One line, an incomplete sentence, no period. It had been written on my typewriter; I recognized the chipped "E" and the "a" below the line, the "u" above. What did it mean?

I went back to Eldon Shelwaite's body and started going through his pockets. The usual stuff: keys, coins, handkerchief. Wallet with a hundred

and ninety bucks in it, which meant it wasn't robbery. And in an inside coat pocket:

Eldie, chum, you may as well forget about the money because you'll never see it again. But don't grieve too much because it really wasn't yours, you know. I'm sure you won't make the mistake of going to the police, because your associates might become very interested in how you milked this \$107,000 out of them. Know what I mean?

Written on a typewriter. But not mine.

I was beginning to get the meaning of what it said.

Eldon Shelwaite had chiselled \$107,000 out of the tracts he'd been promoting, and now it had been stolen from him. And I remembered yesterday how his wife and that detective had been at me about where Eldon kept his money. Had they found out? Had they taken it, and left this unsigned note to point out he couldn't go to the police about it? Had they shot him?

I thought about it, and the shooting made no sense. They didn't have to. He couldn't do anything to them, couldn't call in the cops. They had the money, and that was that.

Or did they have it?

Eldon Shelwaite must have typed that line on my typewriter to compare with the original note. His

checking me at all meant he hadn't been sure who took his money. He had been checking the same thing as his wife and the detective — the idea that maybe Bernice had told me where he kept his money.

He thought maybe I had taken it.

That part made a little sense. And it explained why my place had been searched. Shelwaite had been released by the cops, had discovered his money gone, and had come down to my place. I wasn't at home, but he'd seen me take the key from under the mat the other day. He took it out, opened up, and searched my place. Then the killer showed up, must have knocked — for Shelwaite's body was in front of the door, as if he'd been answering it — and shot him squarely in the face.

But who?

And why?

I read the note again. All this note was going to mean to the cops was that I had stolen Shelwaite's \$107,000; and then when he showed up at my place to recover it, we had a fight and I shot him.

I sat down and lit a cigarette and stared at what was left of Eldon Shelwaite without seeing it at all. I took everything I knew and twisted it into every shape I could imagine, and put it together every way I could dream up, and the answer was always the same. There was only one thing I could do, and just thinking about that thing made me sick.

But I had no choice.

I packed a bag, turned off the lights, pulled the shades, and went out. I still had Shelwaite's keys. I opened the garage, ran his Chrysler into it, locked it, and put that key in my pocket.

Then I got into my own car and drove away.

* * *

The Seavrene Motel was just off the beach in Capitola. It was green stucco, nearly new, and there were twelve units, with a garage between each unit. At six o'clock it was pretty quiet. I parked my Ford where it would look like I was just an early bird down to look at the water, and settled down to wait.

The shades were down in unit number six, and there was a last year's model Plymouth parked in its garage. An hour went by, and then another. At eight-thirty the shades went up in number six, and about fifteen minutes later Bernice came out, wearing a dowdy green skirt and wrinkled white blouse.

I started my Ford, drove past her and beeped the horn, and in another moment she was on the seat beside me.

"Pete! You came to say goodby after all."

"Not exactly." I drove on for a few yards and turned off to park on a side road.

"Then what for?"

"I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

"About Eldon Shelwaite. He's

been murdered."

"You — you're joking." But the soft, shocked tone of her voice said she knew I wasn't.

"He's lying in my front room with a hole through his head, front to back."

She didn't speak. She just sat there and stared at me, the color gradually coming back to her face. I told her the rest of it, and showed her the note. She read it, looked up, and her face was puzzled now.

"What are you going to do?"

"What do you think?"

"Run?"

"Yes." I took back the note. "As soon as I check a couple of things."

"Where will we go?"

"Not we, baby."

"It's got to be we. Who else will dye your hair, drive the car while you hide in the back, buy food, get you a thousand miles away, and rent a place for you to hide until the search dies down?"

She wasn't kidding. If I had a chance, that was it. I said, "Cut it out. I'm already in trouble. A little more won't hurt."

"Your other troubles are peanuts compared to this."

She could say that again. I said:

"All I want from you is information."

"About what?"

"For the last year and a half you had been living with Shelwaite, hadn't you?"

"I wasn't really living with him —

just from time to time."

"Where did he keep the money he chiselled out of his promotion schemes?"

"I was his secretary, and I was in love with him, and he swore he was going to divorce his wife and marry me. He was lying, but I —"

"Look, I don't want the story of your life. Where did he keep all that money?"

"Please, Pete." Her face had a pinched, hurt look. "I want you to understand. Every time I went back to him, it was worse than the last time — I would be sicker, and more ashamed; until finally I knew I'd have to get away permanently, disappear, or I was going to end up jumping off the bridge. So I — so I —"

She was going to start crying in a minute. I could see it in her face. And there wasn't time for it. I said:

"I understand, kid. Nobody's blaming you. We've all got a few mistakes coming to us. Yours was falling for a smooth talking, free-spending, no-good guy. You made a mistake and you paid for it. Just like I did over in Arizona. No sense to go through life looking back at it."

I felt like a preacher, dishing out that stuff; but I knew it was what she wanted to hear.

She looked at me doubtfully, and I pulled as much of a grin as I had left in me, and said:

"Stop holding up the parade, and give with some information."

She brought up a little piece of

smile to match my grin, and the alive look was coming back to her face.

"What do you want to know?"

"Where did he keep all the money that note talks about?"

"I don't know."

"Any ideas?"

"Well, there was a wall safe in his apartment."

"Who else knew about the safe?"

"I don't know. Oh, yes, there was the detective."

"Otto Greck?"

"No, his name was Jones or Johnson or something. Eldon wanted a divorce. He had this detective shadowing his wife to see if she had any boy friends."

"Did she?"

"Eldon said not."

I thought about Mrs. Shelwaite, and wondered. I said:

"Anybody else know about the safe?"

"I don't know. Pete, you do understand why I took such a crazy way of disappearing, don't you?"

So I was back to understanding her. I said, "I guess so."

"I wanted to fix it so I couldn't go back — even if I weakened."

"You fixed it."

"I'm sorry. About you, I mean. There isn't any way to tell you how sorry I am."

She was sorry. I looked at her. Being sorry helped a lot, didn't it? I didn't say anything.

"Don't look at me — that way."

"How am I supposed to look?"

"Please, Pete." Her face was twisting like she might cry after all, and I didn't want that. I patted her hand.

"Spilled milk. Forget it."

"And you will let me help you get away?"

"We'll see."

She took that for yes, and her face relaxed, went pleased, like I'd done something nice for her. "Why don't we start this minute?"

"I want to check that note first."

"Check what about it?"

"Check who wrote it."

"How can you do that?"

"The same way Shelwaite was doing — look for the typewriter that wrote it. His murder is tied up with that hundred grand some way. If I find who wrote the note, I have a hunch I might find a murderer at the same time."

"Won't the police check the note if you, say, mail it to them?"

"Probably, but I can't be sure. If I run, they may just decide I wrote it. If I stay and turn in the note personally, they'd check it; but if it came to nothing, I'd be sunk. I'd already be in jail."

Bernice nodded thoughtfully. "But where will you start?"

"The wife and the detective will do to start. You used to work for him. Was there anybody he took into his confidence? Any of his associates? An accountant, maybe?"

"He didn't trust anybody. Here, let me see the note again."

I handed it to her.

"It wasn't written on any of the office machines. They were all the new electric kind, with the sort of type you see in books."

"That leaves just the wife and the detective," I said. "Which means that I'll need the address of Shelwaite's apartment. Also the address of his wife."

"Can't I go with you?"

"No. Disguised or not, you don't want to show your face in San Francisco."

Bernice took an address book from her purse. "They're both in here."

I put the book in my pocket. "While I'm gone, have your car lubricated, fill it up with gas. Get some dark glasses, buy a blanket, the dye or whatever you need to change the color of my hair, and some bandage and adhesive tape."

"What for?"

"We may need it to partially hide my face. Buy a blanket, if you don't already have one. Get some road maps, and figure a route to New Orleans that doesn't go through Arizona."

"Why not Arizona?"

"Because I may have to ride on the floor under a blanket until we're a couple of states away. Arizona stops you for an agricultural inspection at the border, and they might spot me."

"That's smart." Bernice looked at me, excitement stirring in her face now. "You know, I bet we make it."

"You're damn right we'll make it."

"A new start. For us both."

"That's what." Whistling in the dark. And I was already discounting any result from the trip to San Francisco.

But I had to go.

* * *

I stopped at a pay phone on the edge of Santa Cruz, and phoned my house. It rang six times and nobody answered. No cops yet.

I wasn't much worried about Shelwaite's body being found right away. My place was locked up, and his car was out of sight. His friends or his wife might miss him in a day or so, might even call the cops, but it'd take the cops a while to check as far as me. They might not even check me at all. With luck I might have a week. After that anybody with a nose, standing downwind, was going to know there was something dead in there.

I crossed the mountains to San Mateo, still laying out my plans; and there I phoned the shop, told them I was being married, and was taking a two weeks' vacation, starting today. They didn't like such short notice, but I had the time coming, so I made it stick. Then I phoned Anna.

"Hello?"

"It's Pete."

"Good morning, hubby. Or is it bad luck to talk like that before the wedding?"

"I don't know. "How — how is Papa?"

"In bed." The smile went out of her voice. "I'm afraid he's really sick. We want to call a doctor, but he won't have it."

Good old Papa. He wasn't sick. But he figured if he could sell Anna on the idea, we'd have to postpone the wedding. He wouldn't be sick long.

"I've got kind of bad news, Anna."

"Yes?"

"The company is flying me down to L. A. for a few days. An outfit down there is having trouble with a string of jigs we built for them. They want me to go down and straighten them out."

"Will it take you long?"

"Not more than a week." Not more than the rest of my life. I tried to sound cheerful: "Will you miss me?"

"I miss you already."

I tried to say it lightly like her: "Me too."

"Anyway, it will give me time to work on my trousseau."

"Sure."

"Will I see you before you go?"

"I'm afraid not. The plane leaves right away."

"Oh."

"And, say, I'll be pretty busy down there. I may not have time to write."

"You rat." The smile was back in her voice. "You better write."

"I'll try."

"You'd better try hard."

My laugh wasn't much, but maybe she'd blame it on the connection. "Got to go now. 'Bye."

"Goodby, Pete." The sound of a kiss.

I hung up quick. I sat there in the telephone booth, and for the first time since I was a kid, I wanted to cry. It was all tied up now. Shelwaite was where they wouldn't find him for a while. I was accounted for at the shop, and I was accounted for with Anna. For at least a week nobody would be looking for me, and by that time I'd probably be in New Orleans.

I got into my car, and headed for San Francisco.

* * *

Shelwaite's apartment was on the fourth floor of a five story apartment house, well up on Telegraph Hill. I rode up in a little automatic elevator, then walked along a short corridor to 4-C. I rang the bell, waited, rang twice more, then took out Shelwaite's keys. The second key let me in.

Pretty nice.

Even to my inexperienced eye, the furnishings spelled interior decorator, and a good one.

I got to the den last, and that's where the safe was. Open. It was a little wall job, about waist high, and had been masked by some books which now lay scattered on the floor.

He'd left without even closing the safe again. I moved closer now.

There were some envelopes. I took them out.

One held insurance on his car and furniture, and a list of stocks he owned — over a hundred grand in all. Another had some lists of contractors and subcontractors, a sum of money beside each name. The third held four typewritten reports from the Otto Greck Detective Agency, subject: Bernice Falknor. The reports were straight, even about me only kissing her goodnight and never going into her motel with her.

A fourth envelope held seven reports from Otto Greck, subject: Mrs. Jewel Shelwaite. She had been a good girl.

The last envelope was the snapper. Five reports from the Jownstone Investigation Service, subject: Mrs. Jewel Shelwaite. She hadn't been a good girl at all. In fact, she'd been a pretty bad girl. She had a boy friend, and his name was Otto Greck.

Cross and double cross.

It wasn't hard to figure. Shelwaite had put Greck on his wife's trail, and Greck saw a chance for two fees. Mrs. Shelwaite had probably been only too glad to pay Otto Greck for a clean bill of health — maybe for the lowdown on Shelwaite to boot. Besides that, she'd taken a shine to the rat. Some deal — Greck in the middle with it snowing money from two directions, and maybe a good chance of marrying Jewel and getting the alimony after she di-

vorced her husband.

It took a brother rat like Shelwaite to be suspicious enough to run a double check on his wife.

But it was more than that. It was a motive for somebody to kill Shelwaite — the first I'd found — and I was starting to get excited.

Suppose Shelwaite had told his wife and Greck that he knew all about them. They saw all that alimony gone glimmering; so one or the other — Greck would be my choice — got into the safe and cleaned out the cash. Shelwaite, discovering his dough gone, headed for my place, with Greck on his trail to see what he was going to do. I was gone, Shelwaite searched my place, and suddenly Greck saw a chance to clear Shelwaite out of his path entirely, marry Jewel Shelwaite, and cut himself in on the rest of the money — the stocks and all the legitimate money Shelwaite had.

And leave me holding the sack.

So far it was neat, everything fitted, and I was getting plenty excited; then the fact I'd been overlooking hit me. I was reading Jownstone's reports. I was holding them right there in my hand, and that was all wrong.

Greck would have looked at everything in the safe. He'd have seen those reports, and he'd left them here, because even if he destroyed them, they still couldn't be erased from Jownstone's memory. And he'd never in the world have killed Shelwaite with a plain motive

like that staring the cops in the face. Steal the money, yes. But kill Shelwaite, no.

How about Jewel Shelwaite? She was no brain — falling for Greck proved that. But murder? You could never tell. But I wasn't excited any more.

In the closet of the den I found a portable typewriter. The type didn't match the note.

Neither did Otto Greck's reports. Nor Jownstone's.

Then the phone rang, and I jumped about a foot. It rang three or four times, I put Jownstone's reports in my pocket, then on an impulse I should have resisted, I picked it up.

"Mr. Shelwaite?" A man's voice, vaguely familiar.

"No."

"Who is this talking?"

"My name is Sam Jones. I clean up the place."

"Will you take a message for him?" Who was that guy?

"I guess so."

"Tell him to call Sergeant Wyckehorn, Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office. Got that?"

"Sure." I could feel the hair rising on the back of my neck.

"Be sure he gets the message."

"All right."

He hung up and I put the phone down like it was made of glass. The cops wanted to talk to Shelwaite. That was bad. He wouldn't phone back, and they'd start looking for him.

And something else occurred to me: suppose the cops wanted to talk to Pete Mavrey again? I'd fixed it up with the shop and with Anna so I wouldn't be missed too soon, but I hadn't fixed anything with the cops.

I was starting to sweat.

I locked up and got out of there in a hurry.

* * *

I drove half way across town, arguing with myself about going to see Mrs. Jewel Shelwaite or not. I was jumpy as a cat, and I was starting to flinch every time I saw a black and white automobile.

I finally made a deal with myself.

I went to a pay phone, and put in a long distance call to my house. Nobody answered. All right, I'd go ahead to Mrs. Shelwaite's.

Her apartment house was six stories taller than the hideout over on Telegraph Hill.

Mrs. Shelwaite was dressed for the street, and she said in her scratchy voice:

"What do you want?"

"To talk to you."

"I was just going out. I have an appointment."

"Do you have a typewriter?" I said abruptly.

She jumped, or rather her face did, a little spasm of surprise cracking the mask. "You too!"

"Me too!"

Her eyes narrowed, the mask smoothed out hard, and her lips barely moved as she said, "What's

the big idea?"

As if I knew. "Do you have a typewriter?"

"Yes."

"Could I see it?"

"What for?"

"I want to type something on it."

Her eyes were half shut. "Type what?"

"This." I handed her the note, and she read it.

She was having a bad time with the mask. It slipped again, and this time it slipped bad. "Why — why — where'd you get this?"

"You recognize it?"

"Eldie — Eldie was here with it yesterday." Eldie, like in the note.

"Did you give him his hundred and seven thousand?"

There was no mask now. Just a sore dame with a file edge on her voice: "You know who got that money, damn you. I told Eldie and I'm telling you. You're not getting away with it. If Eldie won't call the cops, I will!"

If it was acting, it was good. And calling the cops didn't fit at all — unless she was acting. I said:

"Eldie is in plenty of trouble with the cops already."

She stared stonily at me a while, then her eyes opened wide like a big idea had struck her. "By God," she said softly, "you must have killed Bernice Falknor."

"Don't be a dope."

"She would have told you about Eldie's dough. But maybe she wouldn't go for robbing him. You

had a fight about it, and you killed her. Then you robbed Eldie."

Of all the bird brains. "Then what would I be doing here, checking this note?"

"It's some trick —" The eyes opened wider, like she'd really had an idea this time. "I — I'll get the typewriter." She turned to an antique desk, and opened a drawer. I should have noticed the drawer wasn't big enough to hold a typewriter, but it took a couple of seconds for that to get through; and by that time she'd faced me again, and I was past noticing anything but the gun in her hand.

"Stay where you are," she said in a voice like a wornout record. "I'm going to call the police."

I stayed where I was.

It was a small gun, a .22 or at most a .25 — not nearly big enough to blast out that hole in Shelwaite's head. With any luck I could soak up two or three slugs from a peashooter like that, and still live; but I wouldn't do much travelling for a while.

She looked at me, and she felt good. "You know, I don't *have* to call the police."

"Then don't."

"We could make a deal."

"Such as?"

"Return the money. To me."

"I haven't got the money."

"I'd let you keep a little. Say, a thousand."

"Say nothing. I haven't got it."

"Five thousand?"

"I told you —"

"Ten?"

"If the deal was ninety, I still couldn't take it. I don't have the money."

She smiled. The way a cat smiles at her dinner. "Never mind. I just wanted to see how much you'd hold out for. You see, I can get it all. In alimony. After the cops sweat it out of you."

"Wait a minute."

She waited, her finger on the dial.

"Before you call the cops, take a look at these." I took Jownstone's reports from my pocket.

She looked at me calculatingly, and shook her head. "Nuh-uh. Some trick."

"Then listen." I read her about half of the first one, and she caught on.

"Why, that filthy, stinking —" She laid it on for a full minute, dirty cussing, the kind it takes a dame to do right. She stopped, panting hard, her face gone hard and bony. "Give me those."

"What good will it do?" I walked over to her. "Jownstone still has his copies."

She was so mad she was shivering. "All right." She hissed it through her teeth. "All right. But I'll fix you, mister." She picked up the phone.

Turning me in wouldn't do her any good. She was just crazy mad, and had to turn it loose on somebody. I said quickly:

"Suppose we split the dough

fifty-fifty?"

She was mad, but not that mad. She put the phone down.

"Where is it?"

"I'll take you to it."

"Nothing doing. You killed one woman already. Tell me where it is."

"Then you'd take it all."

"No, I wouldn't."

"We'll go together." It seemed like I hadn't stopped sweating for a minute since I found Shelwaite's body. "You can trust me."

"I wouldn't trust you with a plugged nickel. Either you tell me, or I call the cops."

I was close enough now. "All right. Hand me that pencil and paper. I'll have to draw a map, or you'd never find it."

She reached for the pencil and paper.

I chopped at the wrist that held the gun — a jiu-jitsu chop, with everything I had in it. God knows why it didn't break her wrist, I hit it hard enough. The gun popped out of her hand, she opened her mouth to scream, and I hit her.

I never hit a woman before in my life, but I hit this one. But, scared as I was, and desperate as I was, I still remembered that guy in the saloon; and at the last instant I pulled the punch a little.

She fell, and I caught her.

She wasn't quite out, but she was so near it she didn't know where she was nor what had happened. I worked fast. I shoved the handkerchief from my breast pocket into her

mouth, and tied it there with the one from my back pocket. I yanked a drapery cord from the window, and by the time I got her hands tied, she was starting to wiggle.

By the time I yanked down another cord and started on her feet, she was wide awake.

I stood up, pulled her skirts down to cover her legs, and said, "Now relax. Nobody's going to hurt you."

Her breath was whistling through her nose, and her eyes above the gag were frantic. You could see the cords stand out in her neck from her silent efforts to scream. She was one scared cookie. Well, let her be scared. She'd sure scared the daylights out of me.

I found the typewriter in the bedroom.

The letters didn't match.

I went back into the living room, and her neck promptly corded up in a scream you couldn't even hear across the room. I'd found a roll of wide adhesive tape in the bathroom, and now I tore off a strip, and knelt down beside her.

"I want to ask you some questions, so I'm going to take off the gag; but first I want your promise not to scream if I do. How about it?"

The eyes just stared at me.

"Nod your head if you agree."

She nodded hard enough to shake her brains loose.

I took the gag out of her mouth.

"Please don't kill me! Please! I didn't mean it about the cops. I don't want the money, you keep it,

I don't want it!"

"Cut it out. Nobody's going to kill you. I asked you if you had a typewriter, and you said 'You too'. What did you mean by that?"

"Eldie was here yesterday with that same note, and he typed the first line on my typewriter. He was like crazy, said somebody had stolen a hundred and seven thousand dollars from him. The first thing I thought of was you, and I said so. He turned my place upside down searching, then he stormed out, and I suppose he went to you. How else would you have that note —" She'd been shovelling it out so fast the words were all run together like a record being played too fast; but now she cut it off like somebody had slapped her in the mouth. You wouldn't have thought a face could get more scared, but hers did. "You — you didn't kill Eldie too?"

"No. I didn't kill him. And I'm not going to kill you."

She stared at me. She seemed suddenly exhausted.

"Has Otto Greck got a gun?" I asked.

"Yes."

"A big one?"

"A — A .38, I think he said."

That would be big enough. "Do you know where he was last night?"

"No."

"What did he say when you told him the money had been stolen."

"Nothing. Just cuss words."

"Did Shelwaite say how he got the note?"

"It was in the safe where the money had been."

"When did you learn about the apartment he was keeping over on Telegraph Hill?"

"Only the day Otto and I went down to San Jose to talk to you."

"Greck told you?"

"Yes. But I figured Eldie had one. He'd done it before."

"Why didn't Greck tell you sooner?"

"He said he only just found out himself." She was shaking badly now, the whites of her eyes showing, her voice coming out choked and ragged. "Please don't kill me. Please, please, please —"

"Cut it out. I'm not going to hurt you. I've got to leave you tied up, so you won't turn me in to the cops before I'm out of the building. But I'll call the clerk in an hour, and tell him to come up here and let you loose."

There wasn't time to see Greck. There was no time for anything now, except getting away.

On the way to Santa Cruz I phoned Mrs. Shelwaite's apartment house, and the clerk sounded surprised at what I told him, so I guess she hadn't been discovered yet.

It was only a little after six when I drove into Capitola. I didn't want to go to Bernice's motel in daylight — the manager might notice me, and if she later linked me and Bernice and went to the police about it, our chances of getting away

would drop right down to zero. I parked the car in some trees on a bluff overlooking the ocean, and settled down with my hat over my eyes like a tourist taking a snooze.

It was a long time before it got dark enough for me to move. I drove to a pay phone, and called my house.

"Hello." Just one word, spoken in a flat, impersonal voice. I hung up.

I was now officially wanted for murder.

* * *

I parked my Ford half a block from Bernice's motel, and walked the rest of the way. There was a light in number six, and the shades were drawn. I didn't knock. I walked in.

The room was empty, but the shower was running in the bathroom.

There was a pack of cigarettes on the dressing table; and I took one, lit it, and walked to the bathroom. The water stopped running, and I said:

"Don't be scared. It's me, Pete."

"Oh." Her head, with a green shower cap, and water on her face, showed at one end of the curtain. She wasn't scared. Her eyes searched my face soberly. "No luck, huh?"

"Worse than none."

"The police?"

"They're after me now."

"Oh." She stood that way a moment, nothing moving in her face. "Are we leaving?"

"If you still want to."

"I do."

"Then we're leaving."

Then her face changed. The excitement came into it like an electric charge. I swear, it was like lights went on in her eyes. She even gave an excited little laugh. "We've got to hurry. Hand me a towel."

I sat down and smoked my cigarette, and I was thinking about something that had been nagging me all afternoon. The timing of that note.

The note specified the exact amount of money, \$107,000, that had been in the safe; which seemed to indicate the note had been written after the thief stole the money. If you accepted that, then you had to suppose one of two things — either the thief had brought his own typewriter with him, or he had left the apartment and counted the money and written the note on his own typewriter and then returned to put the note in the safe.

It just didn't make sense.

Bernice came into the room, with a shiny blue robe wrapped around her, and she was taking off the shower cap. She sat down at the dressing table, and began to comb her hair. "What did you find in San Francisco?"

I told her about it, and she couldn't make anything of the business of the note either. She had finished with her hair, and now she stood up, moved toward the clothes

on the bed, then stopped, her eyes searching my face again.

"What are our chances? Of getting away clean, I mean."

"I don't know."

"Fifty-fifty?"

"Maybe. Maybe two to one against. I don't know."

"We'll make it. Even at ten to one we'll make it. I've got a feeling."

"It'll be no picnic."

"I don't care."

"If we're caught, and if I take a fall for murder, you'll be an accessory."

"I don't care, I don't care, I don't care. Stop talking about it. You know I won't back out."

I looked at her, and I knew she wouldn't.

"And you know why, don't you, Pete?"

I knew that too. Her eyes said it, the way her smile had softened, her whole face said it. "Because you're stuck on me."

"I am stuck on you, darling. Beautifully, wonderfully stuck on you."

"You know I can't give it back."

"Not now. Later."

And suddenly I got a look at myself. I'd been so deep in my own trouble up to now, that I'd scarcely thought of her except as my best chance for a getaway. What she'd have to pay for this prize boner — this business of throwing in with me — was something she didn't rate. It must have shown on my face, because she said:

"What's the matter?"

"I've changed my mind."

"About what?"

"You're not going with me."

"Don't be silly."

"You're not going." I stood up.

She beat me to the door, had it locked by the time I got there. She held the key behind her, and, believe it or not, she was still smiling.

"Give me the key."

"Nuh-uh."

"Good grief, don't you know I can take it away from you?"

"I'd scream. I'd fight. The police would come."

"You wouldn't do that."

Her smile was bright. "I would."

"Why?"

"Because if I can't have you, I don't care what happens to you."

And her smile never wavered.

I looked at her. She said, "Go on, smile. Your face won't crack."

I guess I smiled.

"That's better."

"Not for you. Nothing's going to be better for you from now on."

"Then I'm still in?"

"You're in."

"That's nice." She unlocked the door, and went back to the dressing table. "Now face your chair to the wall, darling. I'm going to get dressed."

I sat and looked at the wall while she dressed, and I thought about how nice it was going to be for her from now on; but, hell, if that's the way she had to have it, who was I to complain? Besides, I knew she

hadn't been kidding about turning me in. I quit thinking about it. I thought about that note.

"This is the part I hate the worst."

"Huh?" She'd been talking, but I hadn't been listening.

"The clothes. The sloppy, ugly clothes. Just look at them."

"What a bag."

"All right," she smiled, "I'm a bag. But you never forget what's really under these clothes. You hear?"

"I hear."

She walked over to me, and kissed me lightly on the mouth. "Just don't forget. That's all."

She kissed me again, hard. "And that's for luck."

It's funny how your mind works sometimes. Like it's in two pieces. We weren't talking about the note or the money; and, with her kissing me, you wouldn't expect me to even be thinking about them. But it was like another part of my brain had been working on the puzzle all the time; and that was the exact instant when it started coming up with the answer. It was like a clock had been turned on, and every tick was a fact falling into place.

I stared at Bernice, and I guess my jaw dropped open.

She said something, but I didn't hear it. I was listening to that clock. She looked at me kind of funny, and said it again:

"What's wrong?"

"You stole Shelwaite's money."

Her face went quite still, and she

didn't say a word.

"Sure you did." Boy, had I been dumb. "And you sure had me fooled, baby."

She still didn't speak, and the color had gone out of her face.

I said: "You wanted to eat your cake and have it too. You wanted to be shut of Shelwaite, but you wanted that dough too. And I thought you fell for that goofy disappearance scheme because you were too dumb to know any better. I was the dumb one. My scheme was the gimmick that handed you the dough on a silver platter."

"Please, Pete, let me—"

"You knew the dough was there, and you'd found out the combination of the safe, but if you stole it, he'd be right after you, might even sic the cops onto you. But if you were to walk out on him and then turn up dead — oho, that put you in the clear, automatically and completely. You had your key to his apartment, the combination to his safe, the police had him temporarily out of circulation — hell, it was a cinch, wasn't it?"

She just looked at me, not speaking.

"It was smooth and it was slick and it worked. My hat's off to you. You made one slip — putting the exact amount of money you knew was in the safe in that note you prepared beforehand. Only one little slip, and nobody'll ever figure out what it means because they all think you're dead."

"I made another one."

"What?"

"You. I love you."

"Then why did you kill him at my house? Hell, why kill him at all. There was no need to."

"I didn't kill him!" She sounded shocked.

"Like you didn't steal his dough. What happened? Did you go to my place last night, and find him there instead of me?"

"No, nothing like that. I swear I didn't kill him. *I swear it!*" She took my coat in her hands. "You've got to believe me. And you've got to see my side of the money thing too. I had to have it. I was sick and ashamed of the affair with Eldon Shelwaite, but with that money I could start over some place, I could be secure. And the man I married would be secure too. I wanted that man to be you. I still want it to be you. Look —"

She hefted the smallest suitcase onto the bed, took a key from her purse, and opened it. "Look at it."

I looked, and it kind of took my breath away. Talking about a hundred and seven grand is one thing, but seeing a case packed to the top with tens, twenties, and fifties is something else.

"It's ours now," she said. "Yours and mine."

"It sure isn't ours."

"But we need it. It makes your escape all the more possible."

"My escape!"

She put her hands on my arms, she

looked me squarely in the eyes, and she said solemnly:

"I know this money makes you think I killed him, but I didn't. And I don't know who did. I love you, Pete. I'd never have put you on a spot like that."

I'm not God. I can't listen to a woman say she's innocent and know if she's lying or not. She must love me, all right — loaded with a hundred thousand dollars the way she was, yet still willing to string along with me, and take the bum end of the odds on losing the money and her freedom besides.

"You're what counts, Pete. We need the money to escape, but once we're free — if you say so — we'll send what's left of it back, or give it to charity, or whatever you say."

Even if she were guilty, the cops would never believe I wasn't in on the scheme. And if she were innocent —

"I didn't kill him, Pete."

Maybe she didn't. If not, that put me right back where I had been. The only thing that was changed was the escape. She was right: the money would make it easier.

"Say you believe me, Pete."

I didn't know what I believed, but I said, "I believe you."

"Thank God . . . Thank God." She put her forehead against my chest like she might be going to cry, but she didn't. She said in a muffled voice:

"I thought I wanted the money, and all the time it was you. I don't

care about the money any more. We'll send back what's left — some way."

I let it go at that. But already, this early in the game, I knew something — we wouldn't send the money back. We'd talk about it from time to time, but we'd always find some excuse not to do it yet; and in the end, we'd never do it.

I patted her shoulder. "Let's get going."

"All right." She snapped the clasps on the money bag, and her face was lively and excited again. "We're going to make it. I know it."

Which shows you what a woman's intuition is worth, for that's the exact second the door opened.

No knock, it just opened and the man walked in.

Otto Greck.

And the first thing he did was reach into his armpit and come out with a gun. The second was to push the door shut with his heel.

"Going some place, folks?" With that sly, pimp's smile on his face.

Bernice abruptly sat down on the bed, like her legs wouldn't hold her up any more.

"Cozy." Greck looked around the room. "Good acoustics too."

"You — you've been listening to us?" That was Bernice.

"More than that, Bernice. I got a tape recording. Which suitcase is the dough?"

Neither of us said anything. Greck said, "Move over there next to the

boy friend, sweetheart."

Bernice looked at me, back at him, then moved over to me. Greck unsnapped one suitcase full of clothes, then the case with all the money. His face went soft and pleased.

"Now ain't that pretty? I tailed you from Jewel's apartment — had a hunch you might lead me to the dough."

The gun was very steady, pointed at my stomach. He was about five feet from me. He reached into the case, and he threw several packages of the money onto the bed.

"For you, lovebirds."

I don't know what I'd expected, but it was anything besides that. I guess I'd forgotten he was a rat. Bernice said:

"You're not turning us in?"

"Me? I'm no cop lover. Let them do their own dirty work."

We digested that, and it was like a reprieve at the door of the gas chamber.

"In fact" — Greck closed the case, snapped the clasps with one hand — "I hope you make it. Not that you could make any trouble if you're caught. It'd be your word against mine, and yours ain't worth much. But it's neater this way. Less bother."

Bernice spoke with sudden energy. "We want a bigger split."

"Now look who's greedy."

"Pete, take the case away from him."

Greck stared at her. I stared too.

Greck said, "Honey, if Pete gets frisky, I'll put a slug in him."

"Then the police would come, and you wouldn't get any of the money."

Greck looked at her thoughtfully. "You got a way with words, Bernice. I listened to you talk this guy around, and it was slick." The brief, sly smile touched me, and went back to Bernice. "But this time you're just plain bluffing."

"But you can't afford to call it."

I took a step in his direction; and his face went hard and flat. He backed like a coiling snake. "Easy, buster. Easy."

We stopped, Bernice a couple of feet closer to him than I was. Bernice said:

"We want twenty-five thousand."

"I might go five."

I relaxed. Five would be all right. Bernice said, "Twenty," and her voice had relaxed too.

Greck moved the gun impatiently. "The hell with the haggling. Ten, and that's the limit. Otherwise, I'll let the cops have it. Jewel Shelwaite'll get it then; I'll marry her and get my share of this and all the other dough besides."

Bernice looked at me, and Greck said, "Speak up. Yes or no?"

Bernice didn't look at him. She looked at me, and her face wasn't relaxed like her voice; it was taut and excited, the eyes shining, and she slowly closed the eye Greck couldn't see. It hit me then, what she was going to do, and I tried to

grab her, but she'd already made her move.

I didn't know anybody could move that fast. One instant she was looking at me, and the next she was swinging on the hand that held the gun, and spitting:

"Hit him, Pete! *Hit him!*"

There wasn't time.

In that small room the explosion was deafening. Bernice and Greck stood frozen, she staring at him in an amazed, wondering way, and him staring back, scared speechless.

Then I hit him.

If I'd hit him any harder I'd have torn his head off.

He landed on the bed, went all the way over, flopped on the other side, and didn't move. Bernice was sitting on the floor now, the same stupefied look on her face.

The green blouse was smoked and powder spotted, and there was a hole in it. No blood yet. "He — shot —"

"Don't talk." I got her onto the bed, ripped open the blouse, and the bullet had gone in under her left breast. And the blood was coming now. God, how it was coming.

I tore off a strip of sheet, made a compress to tie over it, and it made me sick to see how fast the red came up through it. Somebody knocked on the door.

I yelled, "Come in!"

The door opened, and a dumpy, middle aged woman stood there. "I thought I heard — merciful Heaven!"

"Call an ambulance. And hurry."

She got out of there, and I tore another strip off the sheet. Bernice said in a weak, sighing voice:

"He — he — shot me."

"Don't talk." My God, wasn't there any way to stop all that blood?

"Am I going to — going to —"

"Don't talk. You're not going to die. Just don't talk."

"All right . . . Pete."

Greck was moving around a little on the floor. He finally got up on one arm, saw her on the bed, and mumbled, "— didn't shoot her. She grabbed the gun, yanked on it — couldn't get my finger out of the trigger guard — she yanked — that pulled the trigger."

Which was probably the straight of it, but if I'd had the gun in my hand, I might have shot him on the spot.

Finally the cop came.

"What's going on here?"

"She's been shot."

"Who shot her?"

"That guy."

"Wait a minute." Greck got up, rocking on his feet. "She tried to take the gun away from me, and it went off. That's all."

Bernice opened her eyes. "Wanna . . . make a statement."

"Don't talk," I said.

"A statement about what, miss?"

"I killed Eldon Shelwaite."

I could hear the ambulance coming now, wailing, a long ways away. I said:

"Don't talk. Save your strength."

The cop looked at the bloody bandage, her gray face. "She better talk now if she's going to."

Bernice said, "I went up to Pete's place to see Pete, and . . . Eldon was there . . . I knocked and he opened . . . the door, and he recognized me . . . I took gun out of my bag, and shot him in the head . . . Pete never knew a thing about it . . . Pete wasn't in on it all . . . I did it . . . just me . . . lost my head and shot him . . ."

The cop asked some questions, but she didn't seem to hear them. Her eyes were closed again. Then the ambulance came, and the cop went outside to direct them, and Bernice opened her eyes, said in a sighing voice:

"I . . . had a hunch we'd escape. It's too bad . . . it couldn't be to . . . the same place."

I couldn't say anything. I put the back of my fingers against her cheek, and she smiled a little. It was awful to feel how cold her skin was. She was dead.

* * *

It was another two days before they decided I wasn't guilty of anything except tying up Mrs. Shelwaite; and, after all, she had threatened me with a gun. Anyway she didn't sign a complaint.

It was four in the afternoon when I got out, and Anna would be getting off work at the bank soon. But I didn't go there. I went to her house.

Mama opened the door, and she looked at me uncertainly.

"Where is Papa?"

The wrinkled little face looked troubled, even a little afraid. "He is upstairs. He is sick."

She stood at the foot of the stairs and watched me walk up. I looked back from the head of the stairs, and she was still there, troubled, and a little frightened. I opened the door to Papa's room.

He was in bed, his face to me. The bottle of wine was on the night-stand, and the place stank of it. He looked sick all right. Fat and sick and half drunk, and he yelled:

"Whatta you doing here? You think Anna have anything to do with you now? Get away. Get outta my house!"

"You killed Eldon Shelwaite, Papa."

He opened his mouth and nothing came out. He stared at me and began to shake. I said:

"You went there to kill me, didn't you? Stinking drunk. One idea in that pea brain of yours — to keep me from marrying Anna. Shelwaite opened the door; he was about my size, with the light behind him you couldn't see his face, you thought he was me. You shoved the gun in his face and squeezed off."

"No, no, no! The Bernice woman killed him. She maka confession."

"She made the confession to save me. Shelwaite's car was parked outside my place. She knew that car as well as she knew her own. She'd

never even have stopped her car, much less gotten out and knocked on the door. You killed him, Papa."

"You never prove nothing."

"You think this case is closed?

Not on your life. They haven't got the gun that killed him, and they're plenty leery of deathbed confessions. If I took you down there and they sweated you for a few hours, they'd trip you up so many times you'd wind up in the gas chamber. And you know it."

"Don' do it, Petel!" he begged. "I'm a sick man. You're my own son-in-law." He was so scared he was gray. You could almost smell the fear.

"Then say it, Papa. Say you killed him!"

"Alla right, I kill him, but I don' know what I'm doing. I don' know a thing. 'At's the truth. I swear by—" He thrashed over to the edge of the bed and got to his feet and lurched out toward the bathroom. I stayed where I was, listening to him yank the door open and slam it behind him and jerk the bolt.

I was thinking about Anna. Just about her; nothing else.

Five full minutes dragged by, and then I went to the bathroom and rapped on the door. "Papa."

Just as I started to rap again I glanced down at the floor—and my answer was there, crawling through the crack beneath the door.

Blood.

I hit the door with my shoulder. I must have hit it a dozen times before I realized I couldn't break it down. By the time I'd run next door and got an axe and broke into the bathroom, Papa's blood had spread half way across the corridor. I didn't even notice Mama standing out there, until I heard her body fall to the floor. I glanced at her. She was on her hands and knees, staring at Papa, her face almost as bloodless as his.

One look at him told me there was nothing anybody could ever do for him now. He was ugly in death, as ugly as he had been in life. Uglier, because of the razor gash in his throat and the worm-like white strings of fat that hung inside the gash. I turned and walked away from him, my mind already thinking of an excuse for Anna. He'd killed himself because he was sick, sick and despondent.

Behind me I heard Mama praying.

Mama knew. She'd known all along.

But she'd never tell Anna,

And neither would I.



The Set-up

BY SAM COBB

It was a perfect opportunity. Too perfect to pass up, when the dough in the drawer was a passport to Francie and to everything else he wanted.

IT WAS late at night, and I sat around the station house, idly thinking that my newspaper needed me here like it needed a hole in its columns, when the homicide call came in.

Perkins, from the *Globe-Press*, jumped up and grabbed the address from the desk sergeant, and said, "C'mon, I got my car outside. The company pays for the gas and the burned rubber."

I nodded and we headed for the car. Perkins revved it, made a sharp left turn out of the police lot, and we were off.

"Ain't we got fun?" he asked, driving with one hand and buttoning his shirt collar with the other.

"Drop dead," I said. Mechanically, I watched him fumble with the button and then the tie, but my mind was a million and a half miles away.

"A ten says we get a front-page story this time. I've got a hunch." Perkins was young, and he chatted the way he always did when there was the scent of excitement.

"Just think about driving the car

and we'll be all right," I told him.

I would have taken the punk's money easy enough if I had ten bucks to cover the bet, but I didn't have a sou to my name. My paycheck was sliced up more ways than a restaurant pie, and between the bookies, bartenders and a chick named Francie, who knew how to drive me half-crazy, I was in hock up to my elbows.

"You ain't listening," Perkins said, as we slowed down behind a bus driver who acted like he had an inside tip that his company owned Eighth Avenue from curb to curb. "I asked you if you thought it might be a perfect crime. I never covered one of those."

"Naw, you've been reading too many mysteries. Why don't you try comic books for a change; they're educational, help you in your job." He looked grumpy and maybe for a few minutes he'd let me alone. I hoped so. I had been thinking about Francie all evening and I couldn't stop. I had to figure out something to tell her tonight.

She was a nice kid when you had the old mazooma, but when your pockets dried up, so did she. When the horses were hitting she couldn't get close enough. Now that nothing was hitting she was going to cut me off. I couldn't let her go. Never mind what was wrong with her. I had to come up with some awful good promises tonight when I saw her, or some awfully good dough.

Perkins turned to me. "I read comic books too. So what?" he said.

"Keep it up," I said. "That's how guys become managing editors, just reading comic books, that's all. Now get off my back, Junior."

He didn't open his mouth for the next five minutes, and I didn't say anything either. I just sat there, trying to think of something, but nothing came up that sounded like quick money in the bank.

We pulled up sharply in front of a brownstone house in a neighborhood that couldn't make up its mind about whether or not it was respectable. We were about twenty seconds behind the prowl car. Half-heartedly, I stepped out and acted like a reporter. We didn't have to get past the vestibule to find out what happened and who did it. Standing by the hall pay phone was a mangy character, sobbing, surrounded by a bunch of people who didn't seem to speak English. He did, though, and you couldn't stop him from talking once he saw Kozlewski, the cop, a few steps

ahead of us.

"Me! I did it!" he screamed. "I killed her like this —." He shot his hands out in the air and clenched an imaginary throat, shaking as if he had the chills.

Perkins turned to me and grabbed my arm. "He must have strangled her," he said. Sometimes this Perkins acts like he's brilliant.

Kozlewski knew me from before and he nodded, which meant I'd better get his name spelled right. Then he turned to the crowd bunched in around us. "Vamoose. Scram. Get lost," he said. He held his man firmly. "Now speak slow, Buster, so I can understand you, and start from the beginning." Perkins and I reached for notebooks. This character started talking.

"I came home tonight from work," he said. "It was a little earlier than usual, but still it was late. I work a funny shift.

"I started up the stairs to our apartment. Halfway up I saw a man just leaving our door. I thought maybe he was selling something, so I didn't think too much of it. When I walked in my wife looked surprised. She was just putting away a bottle and carrying two glasses into the kitchen. She was only wearing a housecoat. It was open all the way. She had nothing under it."

He had to stop to compose himself. The poor slob. In a second he was ready to continue.

"I asked her who the guy was and what was happening. She shrugged

her shoulders and said something about me not bringing home enough money to give her what she wanted and she knew how to make it." All of a sudden, like that she said it to me. I don't remember what I said. I grabbed her neck and squeezed until she turned blue and fell to the floor. I couldn't run away. I came downstairs and called the police."

He had to lean against the wall. The small hallway was smoky and booming with chatter. Kozlewski motioned to a fat old lady who was clucking away.

"Which apartment is his?" he asked. She pointed upstairs and said, "Number Two."

Kozlewski grabbed this character by the arm and we all headed upstairs. He probably figured when the detectives came they'd ask about the place and he'd better look it over. Very thorough, I thought, especially on an open-and-shut case.

He took a quick look at the not-so-pretty body on the floor and let his eyes wander over the room. It was sloppy, but nothing unusual.

"Okay," Kozlewski said. "Let's head back downstairs so I can call in." The character was still whimpering. I turned to Perkins and muttered, "You head down and see if you can get some quotes from the guy. I'll stay here for a minute and see if I can pick up notes on the room and maybe find a picture of the babe. We can swap later."

It sounded all right to Perkins, and Kozlewski didn't argue because

he still wanted his name spelled right.

When they left I looked around. There was a bureau in the far corner with a drawer slightly open. I walked over to it and started to leaf through the drawer.

Halfway down, under some sweat-ers and slips, my hand touched something and suddenly turned to ice. It was a roll of bills. We're back in business, Francie, I thought to myself. Instinctively, I looked to the door, but no one was there. I started to edge the money toward my pocket. Then, as I turned my head back, I glanced into the mirror over the dresser.

My back grew prickly and the short hairs on my spine played ping-pong with the balls of sweat which suddenly appeared there. She was moving. Sitting up and rubbing her throat. Watching me, staring at the green bundle in my hand. In another second she'd be composed enough to scream, "Thief!"

I shoved the money in my pocket and took three quick steps toward her, cursing the weak joker downstairs who didn't know he was crying over nothing. Then I found my hands were clutching her blue-marked throat until my fingers were like white pieces of steel twined around her neck. I smiled as I thought for a second about Perkins and his perfect crime. "You aren't gonna holler, sister," I heard myself muttering. "No cheap tramp is gonna make me lose my girl."

WHO IS VETTER?

"I felt it starting to burn in me. A nasty feeling that makes you want to slam something. Nobody asked me . . . they just told me and I was supposed to jump. I was the low man on the totem pole, a lousy kid who happened to fit into things . . . just the right size to get pushed around."

"Vetter, I kept saying to myself. They were all scared to death of Vetter. The guy had something they couldn't touch. He was tough. He was smart. He was moving in for a kill and if ever one was needed it was needed now. They were all after him and no matter how many people who didn't belong there stood in the way, the bullets would go right through them to reach Vetter. Yeah, they wanted him bad. So bad they'd kill each other to make sure he died too."

That's Joe Boyle thinking, still in the middle of murder and mayhem in the second installment of Mickey Spillane's *Everybody's Watching Me*. And they're really watching him in earnest now, waiting with guns and fists, waiting to close in. You'll find this next exciting installment in the February issue of *Manhunt*, on your newsstands December 9th.

We're also bringing you a new Lew Archer novelette by John Ross Macdonald, titled *The Imaginary Blonde* and jam-packed with the same hard-hitting style that characterized his novels *The Moving Target* and *The Drowning Pool*.

Together with this, and all in our second issue, is *A Stabbing In The Streets* by Eleazar Lipsky, author of *The Kiss of Death* and *The People Against O'Hara*. And there's a Michael Fessier story titled *Sex Murder at Cameron*, a new Manville Moon yarn by Richard Deming, and many other stories by the best writers of tough detective fiction today.

Our second issue is a big one, packed with reading enjoyment. Watch for it at your local newsstand. You can't afford to miss it!



MUGGED AND PRINTED

MICKEY SPILLANE is the largest-selling writer in the world today. Creator of the famous detective character, Mike Hammer, Spillane's books have sold more than 20,000,000 copies in all editions.



Writing largely at night in his Newburgh home, Spillane types single-spaced, using X's to delete any material that doesn't stand up under his scrutiny. His stuff is authentic, based on information he gathers on sorties to New York's tougher areas.

Everybody's Watching Me, the serial which leads off this issue, is an example of the tight, tough writing that characterizes all of Spillane's work.

KENNETH MILLAR is perhaps best known as the author of *Blue City*, one of the finest, toughest, most realistic novels ever to appear

between covers. Contrary to the tone of his books — *The Three Roads*, *The Dark Tunnel*, *Trouble Follows Me*, etc. — he is a mild man who holds an honorary Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. Mystery writing seems to run in the family — his wife is Margaret Millar.

WILLIAM IRISH, who is equally well-known under his real name, Cornell Woolrich, has a standing order with the switchboard at his hotel. He is not to be disturbed before twelve noon, and he explained to us that he does most of his writing in the wee hours. He is the author of mysteries too numerous to list — his most famous probably being *Phantom Lady*, *The Bride Wore Black*, *Dead Man's Blues*, and *The Dancing Detective*.



FRANK KANE and his private eye, Johnny Liddell, have been inseparable for a long time now. Together, they've slugged and fast-talked their way through *Bare Trap*, *Bullet Proof*, *Dead Weight*, *Slay Ride*, *Green Light for Death*, and *About Face*. You'll like Kane's newest Johnny Liddell story, *The Frozen Grin*.

RICHARD S. PRATHER, author of *Boodies in Bedlam*, *Find This Woman*, and other Shell

Scott mysteries, is now in Mexico. We called him there, but never got him. Writes Prather:

"Today a horde of Mexican maids descended upon me screaming that *yesterday* somebody from *Nueva York* phoned me twice about a story or something. I've just returned from trying to phone in three places (in two the phones didn't work at all); the last attempt to phone was made from the bedroom of the pretty lady who lives next door, but even with the help of the uni-lingual Mexican maid, I never *did* get you. So I said the hell with it, and came back to the typewriter — which still works."

EVAN HUNTER is really a whole lot happier than his disillusioned ex-private eye, Matt

Cordell — the character who makes his first appearance in this magazine. Author of two hard-boiled mystery novels, *The Big Fix* and *Don't Crowd Me*, Hunter is the 26-year-old father of three children. "I'm not a child bride," he told us confidentially.

"The truth is our boys come in double-value packages — twins being the last arrival." His stories come in double-value packages, too, as in *Die Hard*.

